

Green Lights

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/59793409) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/59793409>.

Rating:	Mature
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Hetalia (Anime & Manga)
Relationships:	Finland/Sweden (Hetalia) , Denmark/Norway (Hetalia) , Lithuania/Russia (Hetalia) , Lithuania/Poland (Hetalia) , China/Russia (Hetalia)
Characters:	Finland (Hetalia) , Sweden (Hetalia) , Denmark (Hetalia) , Norway (Hetalia) , Iceland (Hetalia) , Lithuania (Hetalia) , Latvia (Hetalia) , Estonia (Hetalia) , Poland (Hetalia) , Russia (Hetalia)
Additional Tags:	Alternate Universe - College/University , Alternate Universe - Human , Past Alcohol Abuse/Alcoholism , Fluff and Angst , Pet Names , Domestic Fluff , Romantic Fluff , Cigarettes , Inspired by The Great Gatsby , The first fic I ever wrote , Found Family , Abusive Parents , Family Member Death , Implied Sexual Content , Illustrations , Complicated Relationships
Language:	English
Series:	Part 1 of Litverse
Stats:	Published: 2024-10-16 Completed: 2025-03-26 Words: 156,753 Chapters: 24/24

Green Lights

by [Ankhnubis](#)

Summary

Despite his every want and desire, Henrik has never been able to feel romantic attraction. It always hurt him to see his best friend Mathias so in love with his long term partner Lukas, they seemed so happy together. It wasn't that he was jealous, more so that he longed for the ability to feel romantic love. And then one day, he sees someone. Someone, whose mere presence turns him into a complete and utter mess. But Henrik doesn't know anything about him, or what he's getting himself into.

Classic Lit. Inspiration: The Great Gatsby

Fic is illustrated by the wonderful [@/skjalfa](#) on instagram and tumblr

Updates every Wednesday :D

Notes



Chapter 1

Henrik felt like he could stare at him for the rest of his days. That light blond hair, those bright lilac eyes, and that faint scent of pine needles and roasted chestnuts. He placed his head in his hand, leaning against the table at which he sat and enjoying the feeling of his cheeks warming. Henrik let out a soft sigh as he looked on with hopeless romantic intention, gazing across the university's dining hall.



It had been a quiet day. The winter air was serene in its presence. It was too warm outside for it to be truly cold, not that Henrik would have minded, of course, having grown up in Sweden with its frigid winters. He used to miss it, but he supposed it had been far too long since he had moved to remain bitter about it. Henrik was young when he immigrated to America, only just old enough to go into middle school. He had been bitter then, suddenly subjugated by the sweltering Californian heat. But it wasn't all bad, he had decided—he'd had Mathias then, and Lukas and his younger brother Emil joined them in high school. And now... though from afar, was the stunningly beautiful Tino Väinämöinen.

"You're going to have to ask him out eventually," Lukas said crossly, his eyes unmoving from some philosophy novel that he was reading. Lukas was strikingly thin, with wispy blond hair that was tied back on the side with a cross-shaped hair clip. His skin was starkly pale, and he always seemed to have small dark circles under his eyes, no matter how hard he tried to get rid of them. He was about average height, with thin lips and eyes that were a stark navy.

"Yeah Ricky, Luke-y's right! You gotta ask him!" Mathias said excitedly, nodding in agreement. He had his arm wrapped around Lukas' shoulder in a gesture of affection. Much unlike Lukas, Mathias was big and bulky. He only stood a couple of inches above his boyfriend in height and had large broad shoulders, like an athlete's. Freckles adorned his happy and jovial face and he always styled his hair so that it stuck upward in the air. He'd always liked it that way... ever since middle school, at least. He was his closest friend, even though they had fought a lot in the past.

"Don't need to do anythin'," Henrik replied, his gaze across the room remaining steady.

The dining hall was enormous with a big doming top that let in all the natural light of the bright sun. A few evergreen trees decorated the outside, which were visible through the glass walls of the room. But, because of the season, the rest of the trees were barren and leafless. The floors inside the dining hall were a light brown tile, and the chairs were plastic and sort of uncomfortable.

Henrik drummed his fingers quietly on the table the three of them sat at, watching as the sunbeams from above seemed to bathe Tino in their light. He felt like his heart could have melted just by looking at him. He laughed with his friend without a care in the world, and the sight of his smile made Henrik's heart race.



Tino was what many other people might have called ‘average’, His hair was a light straw blond and his eyes were like stunning pools of lilac. He was an everyman— someone that was nice and easy to get along with, but maybe didn’t stand out from the crowd too much. Henrik had no idea why that would be the case, as far as he was concerned Tino was the most attractive person at their university. He wasn’t average to him, absolutely not. Tino made him feel like no one else ever had, like his heart was on fire and that his body pulsed with static. He was so beautiful, so stunning, so encapsulating. Henrik could probably go on for hours about every little thing that attracted him to him, like the way his eyes shone when he laughed, or how he always twiddled his fingers together when he was nervous. Every single mannerism that Tino had just endeared him to him more.

Well, there was all that, along with the fact that Henrik had never felt this way about another person before. For a long while, he had wondered if he could ever feel that way about another person at all. Now, though, he didn't have to worry about such a thing. Of course, Tino was completely unaware of Henrik's feelings of affection. How could he not be? As strongly as Henrik felt, he could never bring himself to actually *talk* to Tino. That was much too unpredictable.

And so, Henrik pined after him in silent repose, something he had been doing since he first transferred to HWU (their university) from Finland last year. It had been love at first sight, if such a thing even existed.

Lukas bookmarked his page, setting it down as he spoke. "'Don't need to do anythin'," he repeated in a mocking tone. "You're right, you don't. Instead, you could just sit here in silent misery for the rest of the year and never tell him how you feel. You could actually talk to him, you know?" From across the table, Mathias let out a little laugh.

"Not today. Maybe tomorrow," Henrik said, knowing that he would do no such thing.

Mathias pouted at Henrik's statement. "You always say that!"

Lukas rolled his eyes and picked his book back up. "Time is a flat circle," he mumbled, probably quoting a line from some random philosopher. "I don't want to hear you complaining when it's too late, and I don't want to say 'I told you so'."

And he would continue to do it, for as long as he had to. Even the idea of talking to Tino made him nervous. He didn't want to embarrass himself in front of him. Joining in Henrik's gaze, Mathias looked over at Tino, his eyes flickering between the two of them. They glinted slightly, in a mischievous and cheeky sort of way, which filled Henrik's heart with a sinking dread.

"Don't," he said in warning.

Mathias ignored him.

He stood up and waved his hands wildly. "Hey! Tino! Come here! Come here!"

Henrik's back straightened, and he averted his eyes from Tino's immediate vicinity. "What are you doin'?!?" he bristled quietly.

"Getting your man for you!" Mathias said happily, waving harder.

Much to Henrik's dismay, Tino acknowledged them, waving back and standing as he walked over.

Henrik's face warmed. Perhaps he'd have something to say if he wasn't so incredibly embarrassed. That, or he'd have punched Mathias square in the jaw. He felt his heartbeat quicken and his breath run short. Just watching Tino approach was enough to allow the butterflies in his chest to fly. The way his hair bounced slightly when he walked, the way his large jacket hung effortlessly off his frame, and the way he smiled. God, his smile, it was beautiful in its simplicity, lighting up his entire demeanor. It was like he was the living embodiment of joy itself.

He was so lost in his admiration that he failed to realize that Tino was actually getting closer. Breaking from his stare, he looked around frantically for something to occupy his hands with before settling with the bottom hem of his shirt. He quickly lowered his gaze to the floor, hearing the oh-so-familiar voice of his beloved as he stood in front of their table.

“Hey Mathias, nice to see you!” Tino said politely. Henrik could almost hear the smile in his voice, and he felt his face heat just from hearing him speak. He had an incredibly thick Finnish accent—so much so that it was somewhat hard to understand him. Not that Henrik cared, he knew his own accent was pretty bad as well.

Mathias smiled and leaned forward, tapping the seat directly across from him excitedly in a motion to invite Tino to sit down.

“Good to see you, Tino,” Lukas said, his eyes unmoving from his book.

Accepting Mathias’ invitation, Tino placed his bag down and took a seat, leaning his elbows against the table. Henrik snuck a glance at him, his eyes peeking up from his lowered head.

God, he was just stunning, so effortlessly beautiful, and he wasn’t even trying. The jacket he was wearing—a light brown with neon yellow reflectors around the sides—was absolutely massive on him. It made him look...so *adorable*. It was clearly the jacket of some kind of firefighter, and even though Henrik wanted to ask, he was too shy to say anything about it. Henrik loved the cute button shape of his nose, and the way his eyes were slightly down-turned, giving him a look of kind understanding. His skin was very pale, but he had no freckles, and when he laughed, he sometimes put his hand to his mouth to cover it. As he stared at him, he wanted nothing more than to hold him tight and proclaim his everlasting love for him. But he couldn’t do that, because that was much too embarrassing.

“How’re you doing?” Mathias asked, grinning happily.

“I’ve been well,” Tino said with a smile, tilting his head a little. “This workload’s been kicking my ass, though.”

Mathias nodded, groaning in agreement. “Ugh, I know. Thank god you and Lukas always keep me up on my assignments. Our seminar class is *such* a bore.” Lukas let out a slight huff of annoyance.

Tino’s eyes shifted between Lukas and Mathias, but stopped at Henrik. “Oh, hi! You’re Henrik right? You’re in that class with us too, aren’t you?”

Henrik froze.

Tino was actually speaking to him.

He felt his heart pounding through his chest and his breath caught. Electric bolts seemed to zip throughout his body as he slowly lifted his head up to meet Tino’s stunning lilac eyes. He didn’t know what to say. He couldn’t think of anything. His mind was too frantic—racing to find any semblance of a normal thought. He parted his lips slightly, but found no words able to escape them.

“Mm,” he grunted.

Tino flinched back a little, taking his arms off the table and sitting up straighter.

“Um, good to see you,” he said in a stilted sort of way, unease coating his voice. He shrunk inwards on himself, his hands moving in front of his chest like it was a defensive reflex.

Henrik looked back down at the floor, feeling an inordinate amount of shame. Because Tino was afraid of him. Many people were, so he supposed he couldn’t blame him. Some things just don’t change, including how other people see you. They had judged him on that all his life, and he felt stupid for letting it slip his mind for a second.

“Anyway, Tino,” Mathias almost shouted, desperate to relieve Tino’s anxiety and regain his attention, “I’m having a little party at me and Ricky’s place to celebrate winter break next week, you should totally come! I feel like we never see each other outside of class, you know?”

Mathias’ friendly demeanor seemed to bring him right back down to earth and ease him once again, much to Henrik’s relief. Tino nodded, smiling at him in a cute and happy way. Mathias had always had that effect on people. While Henrik pushed people away, Mathias brought them in. It was something he had always been jealous of. When they were young, Mathias could always make new friends. Henrik had remained almost entirely alone. Not that he wanted to, of course, but when everyone is terrified of you... what else can you do? But now, that soft yearning for something more replaced itself with deep, vigorous envy. He watched Mathias speak effortlessly with him, able to do everything that Henrik couldn’t.

If only he could talk to Tino like that, too.

“That sounds like so much fun!” Tino said happily. “I’ll be there!” He scratched the back of his neck. “I’ve been a little stressed lately, even though all my classes are easy. I’d love the chance to relax a bit—you know, with the holidays coming up so soon.”

“I know!” Mathias said excitedly. “Do you have any plans for the season?”

Tino was about to speak but got interrupted by a tall young man with rectangular-framed glasses, teal blue eyes, and messy blond hair that sparkled when he moved. Henrik furrowed his eyebrows slightly, surprised to notice that he was wearing glitter in it. He had a light blue sweater vest with a white collar that poked out at the top. He stopped behind Tino and put his hand on his shoulder, his eyes not leaving his phone. “Come on, we need to go,” he said, not looking up. “We need to get to the library.”

Tino sighed, looking almost *disappointed* that he had to leave. “Fine, fine, Eduard,” he said. “I’m getting up.” He stood, but let a last glance go over the table. Henrik lifted his head and met Tino’s gaze. Their eyes locked for a moment, brief and fleeting, and yet he felt his heart skip.

Eduard’s gaze came off of his cellphone and fell on Henrik. His eyes widened and his posture straightened in a jerky sort of fashion. “Okay, time to go!” he said hurriedly, grabbing Tino’s arm and yanking him away.

“Wait,” Tino said, “I wasn’t done!” He glanced behind him, giving the three of them a friendly wave. “I’ll see you guys on Friday, okay?” He and Eduard disappeared, vanishing into the crowd of people in the dining hall.

Henrik let out a long, heartfelt sigh. They had made eye contact.

“Wait!” Mathias called with a quiet defeated tone, still moving to pull out his red cellphone. “You need to give me your phone number...”

“Idiot,” Lukas said flatly, rolling his eyes. Mathias pushed his phone back into his pocket.

Henrik couldn’t bring himself to say anything, his eyes remaining firmly on the place Tino had left from.

“Well, you can thank me now,” Mathias said, forgetting his previous discontent. “He’s gonna be coming over to our place, just for you!”

Those words repeated over and over in his head, over and over, until his head spun and he felt queasy. Because Tino was coming over. Because this man who he had spent so long pining over was going to be spending time with him. His cheeks felt warmer. And then he realized he'd actually have to talk to him. And he just knew he couldn't do that—not when he couldn't get the words out.

“What’ve you done?” he asked with a small groan. He put his elbow down on the table and propped his head up, hiding his face in embarrassment. “Y’know, I won’t be able to talk to him. And he won’t want to talk to me.”

Lukas brought his eyes back up from his book, peering over its pages. “He remembered your name, though.”

“Tino’s friendly, doesn’t mean much,” Henrik said doubtfully.

“Come on, buddy—have some confidence!” Mathias replied, placing his hand on his shoulder and shaking him a little. “You’ve liked him since...” he paused, as though trying to remember, “what, like last year?”

“The second he transferred,” Lukas corrected.

Henrik shook his head, standing up and throwing his bag over his shoulder. “What’s the point? Is he even gay? I don’t know how I would communicate to him *I* am.”

Mathias let out a boisterous laugh, tugging at the straps of Henrik’s backpack. “Oh yeah, I’m sure this stylish Kånken bag and your ‘Best of ABBA’ Spotify playlists will render him clueless. If not that, I think your constant ogling might give him a hint.”

Henrik rolled his eyes. “I’m leavin’. See you later.” Suddenly, he didn’t want to be around his friends anymore.

Before Mathias and Lukas could protest, Henrik turned and walked out of the dining hall. As he left, he heard the murmuring of the other students, all pausing momentarily to stare at him in fear. They naturally parted for him—which was something that Henrik had become embarrassingly used to. It’d been that way all his life, after all. He walked with heavy steps, his thoughts still clouded with images of that beautiful man he knew he had no chance with.

“Come on, Tino! That guy is *terrifying*!” Eduard practically shouted as they walked out of the dining hall together.

“Oh, don’t say that!” Tino replied with exasperation, his voice wavering a bit. “That’s so mean! I’m sure he’s a nice guy underneath all that!”

It’s not that he had never noticed Henrik before. He *certainly* had. While he and Mathias talked and joked during their class together, he could always feel the slightly unnerving gaze of his friend. He only knew three things about him: his name was Henrik, he never spoke a word, and from the first time Tino had set foot on this campus, he had *never* seen him smile. There had come points where Tino would try to engage in a conversation, saying hello and waving at him, but Henrik would always avert his eyes and turn away.

Well, until today, that is.

The sudden change in his demeanor confused him, and it somewhat frightened him. In the years that he had known him, this was the first time he had ever verbally acknowledged his presence. It was slightly *disconcerting*.

“You’re too nice for your own good, Tino,” Eduard said, crossing his arms nervously. “Did you see the look in his eyes?” He shivered slightly.

Though the actual distance between the dining hall and the library was short, the walk felt long and torturous as they neared the exit of the building. Their steps echoed, and the faint chatter of those around them filled their ears. The sun glowed through the many windows, casting a brilliant, natural light all throughout the space.

Tino shook his head and smiled, awkwardly batting his hand in dismissal. “I’m sure he’s just...” His voice faltered as he struggled to come up with a word to properly encapsulate his feelings.

“Petrifying? Spine-chilling? Absolutely *horrifying*?” Eduard finished for him. “Yeah, I agree.”

“What I was going to say was that he’s *reserved*,” Tino said a bit tartly.

Eduard was usually quite a nice person to be around. He’d been his first friend when he transferred and had been a great help to him when he was getting adjusted to the new environment. Sure—he was snarky sometimes, but never outwardly rude. So why was he acting so mean towards Henrik? Someone that he probably didn’t even know. Tino knew little about this man, but he wasn’t about to let Eduard completely slander him. Yes, he was a bit intimidating... Actually; he was *very* intimidating, but that probably wasn’t his fault right?

“Say what you want,” Eduard said. His discomfort finally seemed to leave him as his pace returned to a more average speed. “Tolys and Raivis are already waiting for us.” He ran a hand through his shining blond hair, stepping forward to open the door to leave the Dining Hall so they could go to the library.

Tino simply nodded, then turned to look out at one of the many windows that lined the walls



And for an inexplicable reason, his heart started pounding.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes



It had been a long day.

Tino stretched himself out as he walked into the gym's locker room, bringing his hands behind his head and puffing his chest out a little. His eyes were drooping slightly, as he felt tired. It was nothing a couple hours of working out couldn't fix, and it would be the perfect way he could relieve some stress. Even though his classes were easy this term, it was still his senior year, and he wanted to finish this semester as cleanly as possible.

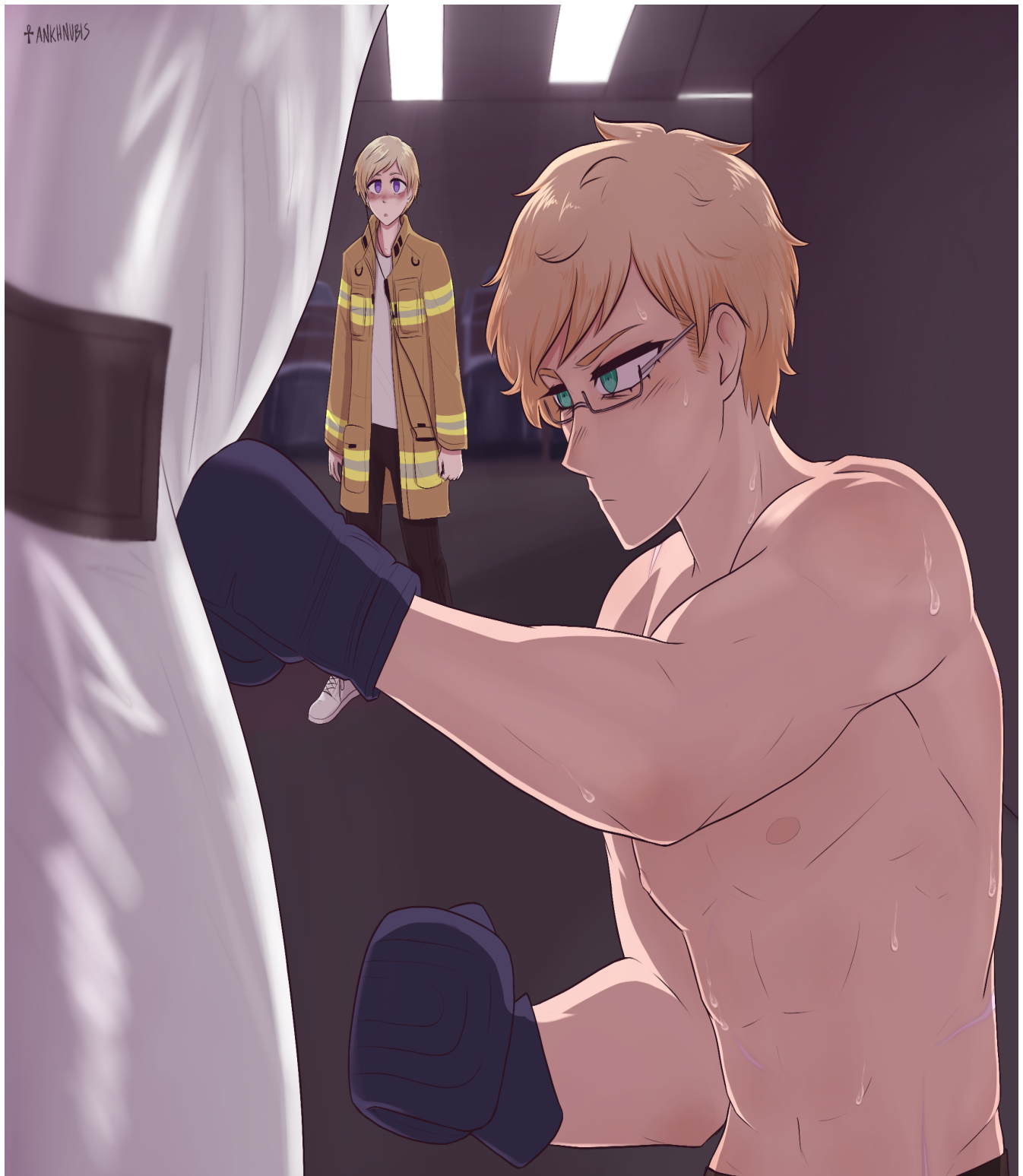
Yawning, he stretched his arms out and slid off his jacket, placing it lovingly on one of the overhead hooks in his locker. He looked at it for a second, admiring it before brushing something off of the fabric. His gaze flickered over the many pockets that lined the front and the sharp reflective lines that ran across the body and sleeves. He pulled out a new set of clothing: a simple white, sleeveless shirt and a pair of black track pants and changed.

It was common for the gym to be empty at this time of evening, and so the desertedness of it was no surprise. The room was clean—all the towels were folded nicely, and each locker was shut and sealed closed with their own lock. Tino didn't use his own locker for storing much other than an extra set of gym clothes when he needed them. The brown tiles of the floor shone lightly as Tino looked down at them—the artificial lights above him flickering slightly with age. The showers, which were to his left, dripped quietly with sparse droplets of water. It was the only sign that anyone had ever been here at all.

Tino pulled his coat back on, slipping his arms through the sleeves and digging in his bag for his phone—an old Nokia—and a pair of headphones. He shoved one earbud into his ear as he left the room, his eyes remaining preoccupied as he attempted to pick a song from one of his many playlists.

He pushed through the door and into the gym, looking down. His mind was clouded in thought and concentration as it ran over boring, trivial things. The gym wasn't much to look at. Though it was large, it was relatively plain. Treadmills and televisions lined the walls, along with a good deal of other equipment. The interior was painted a deep black, but the room was illuminated by bright fluorescent lights that shone overhead.

He went to place the second earbud in his ear, but it was an action that went uncompleted. His hand dropped as he took in the sight directly in front of him.



His earlier assumption was proven wrong by the tall, shirtless, blond man that stood 20 feet before him. Poised in concentration, he wiped the sweat off his brow before tightening himself into an offensive position. He punched at the sandbag that hung in front of him—his hands covered by navy blue boxing gloves. His form was steady, and each punch was strong and precise. The sandbag wheezed heavily after receiving each blow, and his arms rippled with power and intensity as each strike landed against the soft vinyl.

Tino felt his face grow hot.

He tried to turn his gaze away but couldn't bring himself to do it. His heart raced against his chest, the sound pounding in his ears as he stared. It had been a long time since someone had made him feel *that* way... He wanted to speak, to say something to this dazzling herculean man in front of him, but all the words known to him died in his throat. Instead, he let out a little squeak of a greeting.

"Hi."

"... Sorry," He said.

Sorry...? What could be sorry for? He had done nothing wrong as far as Tino was concerned. Quite the opposite, actually. Tino's face still felt hot from the sight of him. His brute strength, his steady focus, and the grit of his teeth as he hit the sandbag in front of him with such an intense force. All of this—of course—had been interrupted by Tino's own interjection, but he couldn't help it. Henrik was beautiful.

"For what?" he asked.

Henrik blinked twice, as though he too was unsure what he was apologizing for. It took a moment for him to respond.

"For not bein' dressed." He rubbed his arm with discomfort, not meeting Tino's gaze.

Tino gave him a confused look. "... In the gym?"

Henrik's face remained fixed on the sandbag in front of him. "Mm."

Tino approached—stepping closer to him, but Henrik's eyes widened and he took a step back.

"Um. I have to go. Sorry."

"Oh," Tino said.

Henrik nodded to him politely before slinging the bag over his shoulder, quickly exiting into the locker room. And just like that, he was gone.

Tino put his hand to his cheek—feeling its warmth. What exactly had just happened? Was this some type of sign? Something to prove that he could differ from how he had been before? He looked down at his hands, blinking a few times before tightening them into fists. Discarding his jacket, he walked over to the weights rack and picked up a pair of them before sitting down on a nearby bench.

This was a good thing, he decided, lifting the dumbbells to his chest with determination.

Because this time would be different.

Henrik shifted slightly as he leaned against the wall in one of the *many* empty hallways of their university. He still couldn't get the events of yesterday out of his mind.

He felt his face heat.

Tino had seen him at his most vulnerable and most exposed, and they hadn't even gotten to have a full conversation yet. Henrik brought his forearm over his chest as he held his wrist, covering his torso. He wouldn't have cared if it had been anyone else. He and Mathias worked out together all the time. But it was different with Tino. He had this magical ability to make Henrik's heart pound like it never

had before, leading him to feel very nervous when he was around. He didn't want to embarrass himself in front of him, but he was also pretty good at doing that.

He had to wonder why he had even taken it off at all. Of course, the answer was that he had been hot and sweaty—and that the gym was almost always empty at that hour anyway—not that he would have cared if anyone had seen him. Well—anyone other than Tino, that is. So, of course, it was just his luck that it was him that came in through those doors.

He brought his hands together, twiddling his thumbs as he thought of him. He hoped Tino wouldn't think of him strangely because of that encounter. It hadn't been ideal, *but* they had exchanged a few words. A few fleeting, simple words, but words nonetheless. He sighed a little as he imagined Tino's soft face and gentle smile.

But why would Tino be at the gym...? He certainly didn't seem the type, from what Henrik knew of him, anyway. Well—not that he actually knew him much at all. He shook the thought aside. Tino was stunning, and maybe he didn't know a lot about him yet, but he'd be damned if he didn't try. Tino was absolute perfection, and Henrik was determined to claim his heart in any way he could. He shifted in his spot and clenched his hand into a fist over his chest. He would make Tino his—and Henrik would turn himself over to him. They would be together.

... If that's what Tino wanted, anyway.

“Hey!”

Suddenly, a chipper little voice sounded off next to him.

And like the universe itself was watching over him, Tino had suddenly appeared in front of him. Henrik must've been too lost in thought to notice him—and all the confidence that had welled up within him deflated. Was this some kind of cruel joke? Like whatever gods that resided above him wanted to make sure that he followed through on his promise?

“I've been thinking about Mathias' party, I'm super excited for it!” Tino said. He spoke with a suspicious amount of enthusiasm—though Henrik supposed it must've been nerves. His fingers were squirming at his sides, and he quickly shoved them into his pockets.

... Party? Henrik didn't know what he was talking about. He thought back—pushing himself to remember. He felt his heart stutter when he did. Right—the one in which Tino was going to come to his and Mathias' apartment. That party. Tino said that he was excited and thinking about hanging out with him and his friends. He felt a couple of butterflies in his stomach. Was Tino trying to get close to him? To spend some time together? His eyes glanced to look at the blond man who was standing before him—clearly waiting for him to say something in reply. But what could he say? He didn't know. He could feel his throat tightening and his breathing being restricted—and he forced out the first thing that came to his head.

“Mm. Right.”

If he could have punched himself—he would have.

Tino blinked twice in response, taking a bit of a step back before seeming to find his ability to speak again. “So—uh—how do you know Mathias?”

Henrik stared at Tino. Though he was small—he seemed determined. But to do what? Henrik wasn't sure he knew. All he could do was pray that he didn't come across as malicious or scary as the two

stood in each other's presence.

"Known each other since middle school, when I moved here." That was the longest sentence he had ever spoken to Tino. How pathetic was that? He figured it would suffice. Tino didn't need to know his somewhat loaded history with his old friend. If this conversation went well—maybe he would tell him one day. A day when he would no longer feel so anxious around him.

Tino straightened his posture slightly, a small nervous smile forming on his lips. His eyes went up to meet Henrik's gaze, but he almost immediately looked away.

"Oh, uh—where'd you move from?" he asked. Henrik's heart warmed a little. Tino wanted to know more about him—even if he seemed nervous. He was still attempting to keep the conversation going.

"Sweden." He paused for a moment. If Tino was trying to have a conversation, he figured he *at least* should return the attempt. "You're from Finland, right?"

Tino looked sort of shocked, his face growing a bit flushed. He paused for a little while before he answered.

"Um, yeah," Tino said. Their eyes connected. "I was born in Helsinki." As childish as it was, making eye contact with Tino was like a dream come true. It was some wishful fantasy that he had longed for—for him to catch his attention and hold it, even if briefly. It was stupid, Henrik decided, but that didn't stop the thumping of his heart as he held his gaze.

"Beautiful place."

Of course, he wanted to know more. He wanted to know everything. He wanted to know every minor aspect of his life—his hobbies, his interests, his quirks. But of course, that would be a strange thing to ask, and he didn't want to come off as imposing. Henrik knew he was intimidating enough as it was. Perhaps he would feel more comfortable if he gave more information about himself.

"I'm from Stockholm."

Tino nodded a little. "Do you want to sit down?" his voice croaked slightly, but his eyes remained fiercely sharp.

He definitely wanted something. But what...? Henrik couldn't help but wonder. But if Tino wanted his attention, he would gladly give it to him. He would give him as much as he could offer. His love for him was deep and hopeless, but this chance—it could change everything. He felt a bead of sweat form on his forehead—which he quickly wiped away.

"Mm," he said.

Tino turned and started walking, and so Henrik followed. He didn't lead him very far—simply to the nearest abandoned table that sat in the empty hallway. Still, every heart-pounding step roared in Henrik's ears. He felt his face growing hot as he watched the form in front of him.

He knew it was something he had thought a thousand times—but Tino's beauty was something that he would never grow tired of. His clothes were simple—he wore the same jacket every day after all, but it's not like that mattered to Henrik. Tino knew what he liked, and that was good enough for him.

Tino pulled a chair out and spoke, his face angled away from Henrik's.

“So,” he said as he took his hands out of his pockets and twiddled with his fingers, “why’d you leave Sweden?”

Henrik set his bag down on the table as he sat down across from Tino. With a small shrug, he answered, “Parents found a job here.”

It was a short answer, but it was a short story. One that he wouldn’t subjugate Tino to. Maybe some time, but not today. But there was a small list of things that made his move worth it eventually. One of them sat right in front of him.

There was no Tino in Sweden, after all.

“Oh, I see,” he said. He smiled a little. “I wish my mother and grandfather could have moved here with me.” He scratched the back of his neck. “It’s a bit lonely with no family here.” That was a bit of a strange answer. Why not his father? Henrik wanted to ask, but figured it would be rude. They barely knew each other after all. Maybe one day Tino would tell him, but for now he just had to trust his horribly lacking conversational skills.

“No one?” he asked.

“Yeah,” Tino replied, “I was the first one in my family to leave Finland. Settling here was hard, but I think I’m used to it now. My English wasn’t the best at the beginning.” He laughed a little, bringing his hand up to hide his smile.

His English was good enough for Henrik. Hell, he could be speaking Greek for all he cared.

“Took me a while to learn English too,” Henrik said quietly, interlacing his fingers underneath the table. “I missed Sweden a lot. Hard to make friends.”

Tino’s face softened as he looked over sympathetically. “I know exactly what you mean.”

Henrik felt his face flush, he could hardly stand it, Tino looking at him like that, the understanding in his face. He felt his heart pound harder against his chest.

“You do?” Henrik couldn’t help but ask.

Tino nodded his head. “I had to use my friend, Eduard, as my own personal translator for a little while.” He let out a light laugh. “Finnish and Estonian are kind of similar, so he helped me with a lot of the small things.”

Eduard, who even was he? He thought back and remembered that he was the one who had brought Tino away—that day in the dining hall. Was he possible romantic competition? Well, no. Tino had said ‘my friend’ so obviously not that. Was he being paranoid? Yes, without question. But the thought of Tino’s heart going to someone else terrified him.

Inevitably, Tino would find someone, though—more than inevitable. How could he not? He’d eventually get with someone if Henrik didn’t act. But how soon should that be? Tino didn’t seem too nervous anymore, but he didn’t want to move too quickly. For now, he supposed it would be best to just continue as normal. He was about to say something more when they were interrupted by the appearance of a tiny blond man with deep and sunken cerulean eyes. He was wearing a light red sweater, and matching shoes with tan pants and a white-collared shirt.

“Tino,” he said. “Can we go home?” He clutched a notebook tightly to his chest and held a black pen in his hands. This guy was remarkably small, his head reaching just below Henrik’s shoulder—there’s

no way he was a student here... Right?

Tino sighed with a somewhat resigned look on his face. He stood, pulling on the sides of his jacket.

“Alright Raivis,” he said, patting his shoulder affectionately. Raivis looked up at Tino, a small smile on his lips. He turned to look at him, and for one of the first times in Henrik’s life, a complete stranger met his eyes unflinchingly.



Henrik studied him—he was strange; with soft and fluffy hair that fell slightly above his eyes. He figured that someone that small would be especially terrified of him, but that assumption was

obviously proved wrong by his steady gaze.

Who was he, exactly?

And just like that, the trance was broken.

Before Henrik could process it all, the two of them began walking away together. Tino looked over his shoulder and waved. "I'll see you tomorrow!"

The words shot through him. Had he actually said that, or was that just his imagination? Was Tino saying that he wanted to see him again? If his heart had been pounding before, it was now leaping out of his throat. He could barely speak; his nerves were overpowering.

"Mm," Henrik responded simply.

And just like that, Tino and his small friend were gone, and Henrik was alone. He leaned against the table, wrapping his arms around his backpack. He brought it closer and fiddled with the little fox logo on the front. The conversation looped over and over in his head. It was still unbelievable to him that Tino had wanted to talk to him. Tino wanted to see him tomorrow, too.

Was he reading too much into it?

Probably.

Almost definitely.

Absolutely.

But he couldn't help it.

He sighed and put his chin to the bag in his arms, resting against it in resignation.

Tomorrow.

He could wait until then.

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary



“Nice going, Ricky!” Mathias cheered, reaching up and patting Henrik on the back. “I knew you could do it!”

The wind was frosty as Henrik, Mathias, and Lukas walked together to the parking lot. His and Mathias’ apartment was within a close distance to their university, but the two of them usually walked Lukas to his car after their classes were over. Mathias, because he loved being with his boyfriend and Henrik, because he’d rather be with his friends than walk home alone.



“You surprised me, I’ll admit,” Lukas said, though his voice remained monotone. “I didn’t think you had it in you.”

Lukas seemed to be unbothered by the cold, but then again, he was unbothered about most things. Mathias, meanwhile, was chattering his teeth and fidgeting as the soft wind blew. He’d probably be

rubbing his arms for warmth if he wasn't so determined to keep his arm around Lukas for as long as possible. Henrik moved his eyes down and looked back at the sidewalk.

"No faith in me, Lukas," Henrik said with a disappointed shake of his head. "Surprised myself, though. Didn't expect him to stay and talk for so long."

"I've been telling you forever, dude—he's a nice guy!" Mathias said, putting a hand on Henrik's shoulder and shaking him a bit. "Now you just gotta ask him out." He smiled mischievously. Lukas rolled his eyes.

Henrik's heart jumped at the idea, but he sighed, roping himself back down to reality. As much as he wanted to, it was far too soon to ask for something like that. "Just had my first conversation with him. Can't get too carried away."

"Well, you need to make your move already. What if someone else starts chatting him up?" Mathias asked.

Henrik stumbled slightly in his step, suddenly feeling the wind chill.

"You don't think he would, do you?" he asked.

"You're lucky enough as is," Lukas said dryly. "It's a miracle he hasn't been involved with anyone since he came here."

"... Yeah," Henrik agreed, more to himself than anyone else.

"Don't worry, buddy," Mathias said enthusiastically, patting his friend on the shoulder. "All you have to do is walk up to him and ask for his phone number!"

Henrik felt his face heat. He couldn't just do that. Sure—they'd shared a few words—but that was hardly grounds for anything. He wasn't like Mathias—who was so charming in his disposition that he could surely get anything he wanted. He wasn't some shy and awkward mess like Henrik was—at least around Tino. There was no way he could do something like that.

"Easy for you to say, Mathias," Lukas said, with another roll of his eyes. "You weren't the one who had to ask."

Mathias paused for a moment before he came up with a rebuttal.

"Hm... but, hey! I didn't think Luke-y was asking me on an actual date or anything, so maybe Tino'll be the same! Just because you ask for his number doesn't mean he'll take it as you being interested! He'll probably think you wanna be friends!" Mathias elbowed Henrik lightly in the ribs, which he ignored. It's not like he had much to say on the matter. Mathias' enthusiasm was usually infectious, but not today. Henrik found himself too weighed down by his own thoughts to bother indulging in fantasy.

"Don't assume Tino is as oblivious as you are," Henrik grumbled.

"Well," said Lukas with a resigned sigh, "you already got further than I thought you would. Maybe he'll end up asking you for yours instead."

Henrik's heart fluttered a little. "You think so?"

"Didn't he approach you in that hallway?" Mathias asked excitedly. "Maybe he likes you!"

He felt a clenching in his chest as they walked, finally nearing the parking lot they were headed towards. The mere *thought* of Tino returning even a fraction of his feelings made his head feel light. It made him want to smile and laugh and hold him and never let go. But that wasn't reality. It was something that must be let go.

"He's friendly—outgoing. He probably just wants to be friends."

Lukas looked up at him, his soft blond hair blowing slightly in the wind. He readjusted his cross shaped hair clip and was about to speak when Mathias interrupted him.

"Oh, come on, he's not even *that* afraid of you!" he said with glee as they finally arrived in the parking lot.

Henrik shook his head. "Seemed nervous when he was talkin' to me."

It was hopeless to be thinking about these things. Of course, Tino was frightened by him—everyone else was. But he had still approached him—still engaged with him. Someone who feared him wouldn't do that. But Tino had seemed to want something when they last talked, as if there was something he needed from him.

But what could that possibly be?

All he could do was hope that he would stick around after he got what he wanted.

"So? Maybe it was from the butterflies in his stomach!" Mathias said. Lukas took out his car keys and jingled them in his hand as they approached the back of the lot.

"Or terror," Henrik replied a bit glumly. Lukas unlocked his car and Mathias ran up to the passenger side.

"Nah," Mathias said with a charismatic smile, "Definitely not." He opened the door of the car. "Luke-y and I are gonna hang out at his place after we pick up Emil from school. Do you wanna come?" It's not that he didn't *want* to. Usually, he would have gone with them. But he just wasn't in the mood for that kind of thing. In all honesty, he just wanted to go back to the apartment.

Henrik shook his head again. "That's okay. See you tomorrow."

"We could drop you back home." Lukas said.

"No," Henrik said, already turning around. "I'll walk. I need to clear my head." Before Mathias and Lukas could say anything else, he turned on his heels, curtly waving goodbye before shoving his hands in his pockets.

"Oh, okay... Um—See you tomorrow, buddy!" Mathias said, clearly surprised by his answer. Mathias' usual boisterous wave was replaced by a small, slow one, matching Lukas' as they climbed inside the car. Henrik didn't turn to face them, staring at the pavement beneath him as he began his trek home.

"Damn thing," Tino muttered under his breath.

He looked at the vending machine in front of him with disdain. Inside sat his chips, held behind the broken ring and stuck at the top.

He already hadn't been having the best day, too many things that seemed to happen just to inconvenience him. In all honesty, he wished he skipped today and stayed laying in his bed—sleeping through the morning and enjoying some nice rest. Of course, he couldn't actually do that, but it was a pleasant fantasy.

He fidgeted with his fingers, wondering to himself if inserting more money would make the problem better or worse. He kicked the bottom in frustration.

"Need help?" came a deep and gentle voice from behind him.

Tino nearly jumped out of his skin, whipping around with surprise as he swore in Finnish. He placed a hand over his quick beating heart and took a step back. But the adrenaline wore off, and he felt at ease when he realized it was only Henrik.

"You scared me," Tino said with a small laugh.

Henrik's face hardly changed, though Tino could tell just from looking at him he was hurt by the comment. His eyebrows knitted slightly, and his face dropped, but only by a small amount.

"Sorry, didn't mean to."

"Oh, no, it's okay!" Tino reassured him immediately. "It's alright!" He didn't mean to make him upset. Was that something he was sensitive about? It was kind of strange to Tino; he wouldn't have expected someone like him to be saddened by such words.

"Oh," Henrik said. There was a pause of silence between them, and Henrik stared at him awkwardly before he seemed to remember what he'd been doing. He stepped forward, turning to the vending machine and grabbing the top of it. With a heavy shake, Tino's chips dropped to the dispenser at the bottom—along with an extra bag.

"Um, thank you," Tino said awkwardly. He bent down and picked them up, feeling Henrik's gaze on him as he did so. He bit the inside of his cheek, his heart pounding in his chest. Calm down. That's what he wanted to do, but there was no quelling it. The beating quickened. He glanced up, seeing Henrik standing there—looking at him and fiddling with his hands. Tino turned back around, feeling an anxious lump in his throat and a flush on his cheeks.

Henrik was *really* pretty.

Tino stood once again, looking him in the eyes. Just that simple action was enough to make him swoon. If he stayed around him for much longer, he felt he might have a heart attack. But he couldn't help it. His strong jawline, statue-like in its shape, the pair of silver glasses that rested on the bridge of his nose, and his sweet scent of pine and earthly air.

How had he never noticed him before?

Tino held out his hand, offering the other chip bag. "Do you," he stuttered a little, "want the other one?"

"Uh..." Henrik looked at him, but through his stoic face, Tino could sense his apprehension. "Mm." With hesitation, he reached forward and took the bag from Tino's hands, their fingers brushing together for a moment. "... Thanks."

But that moment had been enough. Tino's heart beat faster and faster in his chest, and he could feel his face becoming hot. He wanted to touch his hands—to hold them, but that would be ridiculous. It's

not like he could get away with something like that. To hold his hand would be a deliberate action—one that only had one meaning. He wished he could step forward, but he stepped back. He needed to leave before it all came to be too much.

And so he did.

“Well, see you!” Tino said hurriedly, and with that, he turned on his heels and walked. He didn’t wait for Henrik to respond, and he didn’t look behind him. He couldn’t take his eyes off the ground, not even bothering to look at the bright sunshine that cascaded through the windows he passed. Instead, he put his hand to his mouth and bit at his nails.

This hopeless romantic type didn’t suit him.

It wasn’t like him.

And yet...

“Tino!” a familiar voice called—Eduard’s, no doubt.

He looked up, eyes softening when he saw his roommates, Eduard, Tolys, and Raivis. They were sitting together at a table in the dining hall, having probably finished eating lunch a while ago but remaining there to chat. Eduard and Tolys were talking, but Tino noticed Raivis wasn’t saying anything, only taking long drinks out of his water bottle. Tolys quickly scooted over in his spot, making room for an extra seat as Tino approached.

Tolys was the tallest of the four of them, being just a few inches shy of Henrik’s height. He had shoulder-length brown hair, and soft, verdant green eyes that radiated an almost parental warmth. Tolys was probably the most outgoing compared to his other roommates, but that didn’t mean much. The three of them mostly liked to stick together, rarely straying from their established friend group. He was wearing a green jacket and a plain white t-shirt.

“Hey guys!” Tino said as he sat. He relaxed a little, feeling the pounding in his heart subside.

"Got plans for today?" Eduard asked. "I don't know what we're doing yet, but we were going to go out and buy drinks for tonight after classes."

“We thought we could all use a night out,” Tolys said, with a soft smile. His voice was quiet and polite as he brushed his hair out of his face.

“It’s been too long...” Raivis said as he pulled up his water bottle again and drank from it. Tino smiled a little and nodded. It really hadn’t been that long, but he wouldn’t complain. He enjoyed spending time with them; they were his home away from home, after all.

“Nice,” Eduard said, falling back into his chair and putting his hands on the back of his neck.

Raivis glanced over at Tino, his eyes narrowing slightly as he peeked through his dirty blond hair. His lips remained in a tight line.

Tolys followed Raivis’ gaze, studying the two of them for a moment before speaking. “Are you feeling okay, Tino? You look kind of flushed.”

Tino cursed himself internally. Why couldn’t he be better at hiding his emotions? He put his hand to his cheek and felt its warmth. Had it really been like that this whole time?

“Yeah...” Eduard began, leaning in on him against the table, “Are you alright?”

“I’m okay, it’s nothing!” he sat up straighter, and began fidgeting with his fingers. He was desperate for any kind of distraction, for something—*anything*. He felt an aching in his heart—and a soft feeling of longing briefly overtook him. But that was something he wouldn’t easily submit himself to.

Raivis said nothing, unlike the other two. Instead, his eyes narrowed more, searching him for some kind of answer.

Tino’s fidgeting grew worse. The claustrophobic feeling of his roommates looking in on him like that. He knew they just wanted to know what was up with him. He probably should’ve told them by now, but it was embarrassing.

Tino pulled on his shirt collar, feeling the heat seeping down his face in deep waves. He needed to cool down—to be normal. His eyes fell to the table, and before he could stop himself, he reached for Raivis’ water bottle and put it to his lips.

But what greeted him wasn’t the cold refreshing taste of spring water. Instead, it was something much more foreign and strange. It was bitter and sweet, but with a distinctly alcoholic tang to its taste. It scorched his throat. Immediately, Tino lurched to the side, standing up and rushing over to a trash can to spit it out.

“Raivis, what the hell is in that thing?” Tino coughed, spitting the disgusting liquid into the garbage.

Raivis furrowed his eyebrows, crossing his arms as he stared at the trash can. “Balsam,” he said with a frown. “Did something happen? You’re acting weird.”

Eduard stood and walked over to him, patting him lightly. His face contorted to one of concern as Tino turned to look at him.

It was hopeless.

As much as he hated to admit it, here he was. He was desperately lost—attempting to reel in the affections of some strange man he had never really noticed before. It was foreign to him. He let his eyes scan over his friends; they were looking at him too. He took a deep breath, knowing that there wasn’t a point to all his holding back.

“Fine,” Tino said, letting the air he had held release in a heavy, resigned sigh. He stood up straighter, pushing Eduard’s hand off of him as they walked back over to their table. He sat, crossing his arms and leaning against the furniture, putting his head down as he looked up to people around him. “There’s a guy,” he mumbled.

At last, he felt the weight in his heart lighten.

“A guy?” Eduard asked, leaning forward once again. “That you’re interested in?”

“Yeah,” Tino mumbled, a light blush on his face.

“What’s his name? What’s he like?” Tolys asked, attempting to prompt some kind of further response.

Raivis’ eyes flickered over to him. “I’m surprised,” he said, though he didn’t look to be that way at all. “You’ve been here almost two years, and this is the first time you’ve expressed interest in someone...” He trailed off, putting his head in his hand. His eyes flicked back to the table for a moment before he turned to his backpack. Rummaging through it, he pulled out his notebook.

He didn't really know what to say. It was completely true. But it hadn't always been that way.

It definitely hadn't been like that before.

Tino shook his head, ridding himself of the thought before returning to reality. Now was not the time to get caught up in past mistakes.

"His name is..." He hesitated before answering, running his hand through his hair. "His name is Henrik Hellström." He felt himself smile at the name, the warming of his cheeks and the leap in his throat.

He knew he was far gone, but he just couldn't help it. Henrik was too beautiful not to be.

"He's tall and has golden blond hair with piercing sea-green eyes." He lowered his gaze, his voice soaked with crushing affection.

"Tall is good," Tolys said.

"And he has this way of looking—always lost in thought, but saying nothing at all. It's like he has the world on his mind. He's fascinating! And, yeah, he has a bit of a glare, but I don't think he means it. He's really nice when you get to know him!"

"What do you mean 'a glare'? Is he all buff and intimidating or something?" Eduard asked teasingly.

"Yeah, he's big and strong, so much so that it's kind of scary sometimes... But in an attractive way," He quickly added.

With that, he felt Raivis' eyes on him, glancing at him only briefly before he started writing. God knows *what* he was putting down on that page, but he seemed very determined. He'd always been that way.

"So, when are we meeting him?" Tolys asked, putting his hand up and hiding the laughing smile that was forming on his face.

Tino looked up to face him, but it was at that moment he felt his heart drop. He felt his stomach knotting and his tongue twisting and remaining still at the same time. His chest beating quickly and thoughts faltering, he struggled to comprehend just who had come to sit across the room.

Because, of course, like divine intervention, it had to be Henrik Hellström, setting up his computer before sitting down, just a few tables away from where Tino and his friends were sitting.

"Um, right now," Tino muttered nervously.

"Really? Right now?" Tolys asked.

Eduard seemed to notice that he was staring at something and began looking frantically around the room to follow Tino's gaze. Raivis already had his eyes locked on Henrik, probably having found him as soon as he'd entered the dining hall. When Eduard found him too, he looked more than a bit panicked when he realized who exactly the man that Tino liked was.

"No way, Tino, *him*?" Eduard protested. "He's *horrifying*."

Tolys sat up a little straighter when he matched their stares across the room. He turned back around, a bit of a cringed expression on his face as he smiled awkwardly. "Oh," was all he said.

This reaction... was to be expected. Tino knew that his roommates probably wouldn't like Henrik, but it still hurt a little to have his suspicions confirmed. But then again—everyone thought he was intimidating, so perhaps he should've expected this. Still, it hurt a little.

Tino sighed, looking back down and glimpsing Raivis' notebook. It was filled margin to margin with scribbled and messy hand-writing. Just judging by the frantic and passionate flicks of his pen, he was probably writing a new poem. If Tino tried hard, he could probably decipher it, but he decided not to. Raivis probably wouldn't have liked that.

"Come on, Tino, please, I'm begging. Can't you pick anyone else? How about that Norwegian guy you talk to sometimes?" Eduard asked as he turned around, grabbing Tino's hands in his own as he pleaded.

Tino rolled his eyes. "Lukas? He's been with Mathias since high school, he told me himself! No way." He brought his eyes back over to Henrik, sighing a little as he watched him work away on his computer. "But him..." He felt his cheeks darken again and became filled with an incredibly sappy feeling. His fingers absentmindedly ran through his hair as he looked on at him.

Tolys turned back to Tino as tenseness seemed to fill his body. "Are you sure?" he asked. "He's a bit..." He paused, trying to think of a word but obviously failing to come up with one.

Tino furrowed his eyebrows at him. "A bit *what*?" he asked, just a little too rudely.

"Dour?" Tolys said in a questioning tone. "I don't know."

That was a word Tino had never heard before, but it's not like he would admit that. He huffed, leaning back in his chair and crossing his arms. They just didn't get it.

But then came the soft voice of Raivis, who finally turned up from his notebook to look at Tino. "I think you should talk to him," he said.

Right now? Tino's heartbeat quickened. He wanted to. And as awkward as Henrik was, he was still nice to talk to. But doubts settled in, and Tino felt the stress piling in his stomach. He knotted his fingers together tightly, pressing them against each other with nervousness.

"You think so?" he asked quietly.

"Yeah," Raivis stated plainly, "I think you should."

"Don't listen to him, he's *crazy*!" Eduard said almost a bit too loudly. Raivis flinched before reaching for his water bottle and drinking from it.

Tino inhaled steeply, gritting his teeth together anxiously as he stood. "I'm going to do it. I'm going to go talk to him." And with no room for protest, he stood, not even paying attention to Eduard's desperate movements to bring him back to their table.

Tino approached him, moving forward with determined steps until he arrived at his table.

"Uh—hey!"

He tightened his hand into a fist in his pocket, plunging his nails into the palm of his hand. Was he being too weird? He scolded himself—knowing that it was a terrible way to start a conversation but being unable to come up with much else.

Henrik looked up from his computer, freezing mid click at the sight of Tino, gaping slightly. The faint image of a red screen and flames reflected on his glasses, but he paid no attention.

"...Tino?"



He swallowed in nervousness wracking his brain for some excuse about why he had come up to him.

"I just um—wanted to ask if you liked the chips," he said awkwardly.

"Oh," Henrik responded simply. He closed his computer, not taking his sharp, dagger-like gaze away from Tino. "They were good. You like yours?"

Tino bit the inside of his cheek, looking up at Henrik, his slight blush painting his cheeks.

"Yeah, they were good."

Henrik said nothing, but looked across his table for a few seconds. After a bit of staring, he reached out his leg and gently kicked out the chair across from him—silently inviting Tino to sit down. Strangely, his glare was less intense than usual.

Tino swallowed, but took the invitation. He interlaced his fingers as he sat, pressing them hard against each other.

"Thanks for helping me out with the machine," he said.

Henrik shrugged with what could have been nonchalance—though he couldn't quite tell. "No problem." He paused for a moment, allowing thick silence to fill the air for a moment before breaking it. "Party's tomorrow. Doin' anything?"

He tapped his foot nervously. "Oh—no, I was probably just gonna go to the library." He laughed with a bit of an anxious titter.

Henrik tilted his head slightly. "Like to read a lot? Or is it to study?"

"Uh—yeah, I've always loved reading." He shifted in his seat. "It's actually the reason I learned English," he said.

Books were nice, they were solid—unchanging and complete. A book—though having many versions would always hold the same story, no matter the time that passed. Each one offered something entirely new—something he could get nowhere else. They were like a portal to another world—somewhere far, far away from here.

Henrik leaned forward slightly, his face stoic, but his eyes sparkling with interest. He wasn't saying anything, but he was clearly asking him to elaborate.

Tino fidgeted more, shifting his seat again as he looked away from Henrik's face. It felt incredibly embarrassing. Here he was, so overcome with nervousness that he was nearly unable to speak. He looked at Henrik's face for a moment, studying his features. Short, straight blond hair that framed his face, and a strong jawline. He felt himself melting a little before him, watching his eyes twinkle.

He stuttered when he once again brought himself to speak, "All the books I wanted to read—they weren't as good translated into Finnish, so I learned English."

"Hm. Ambitious," Henrik said, "You're good at it. Been here since middle school, yet you're better than me."

His face suddenly felt very warm. Turning his head to the side to hide it, he continued, "Thank you." He gave an anxious sounding laugh. He wanted to compliment him too—to see him smile—that's all. "I think your English is pretty good, too."

Henrik let out a small laugh as a quiet breath. "Don't hear that often."

Tino felt his face burning hot against his skin. So that was his laugh. Something so subdued... It suited him, Tino decided as he looked at his beautiful face. He liked it.

"Well, you know how it is. Learning a second language is hard!" he said.

“Mm,” Henrik said with a small sigh of agreement.

He wanted to stay and talk more, but he felt an almost parental presence at his side. He turned, seeing Tolys standing behind him.

“Come on, Tino, we need to get home. I’m not sure I’ll have enough time to make dinner for you all tonight. I need to drop you all off at home before I can go to the grocery store.”

Annoyed to be interrupted, Tino huffed a little, but it couldn’t be helped. They *had* been running low on food supplies for a while, and he vastly preferred Tolys’ cooking to the food that was prepared by their university. He stood, turning to Henrik with an apologetic look.

“I’m sorry, I have to go.” Tino said.

Henrik looked up at him, staring at him for a moment before he spoke again.

"Right. See you tomorrow, then?"

Tino felt his face flush darkly, before turning and walking away with Tolys. “Yes, of course,” he said over his shoulder. The words repeated endlessly in his head. Did that mean he was *expecting* to see him tomorrow? Once again, he felt the fluttering in his chest.

They left the room, where Raivis and Eduard were already waiting for them. Eduard’s eyes widened at seeing Tino’s state.

“Oh my god,” he said, “you’ve really got it bad, huh?”

Tino let out a breathy, longing sigh. “He’s beautiful, don’t you think?”

“I like him,” Raivis muttered.

“You know what,” Eduard said with a resigned sigh, “I don’t really understand this stuff, but whatever, it’s better than how you were before.”

Tino nodded his head in agreement. It was definitely better. Anything would be better than what happened back then. But that was the past, and Tino had promised himself it would be different.

And it was.

“He seems... nice enough,” Tolys said. His voice was unsteady with apprehension as he moved closer to Tino, patting him lightly on the shoulder.

“Yeah,” Tino said shortly. “He is.”

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes



The long awaited day had finally arrived.

Friday.

The day Tino was to come over to his home.

Henrik shivered a little in anticipation, looking at the clock on the wall of the cafeteria. It was half past 4.

Soon it would be time to leave.

"So, he approached *you*?" Mathias asked in clarification, fidgeting as he sat on the edge of his seat.

"Mm." Henrik's eyes darted down to the table he was sitting at, looking at his hands that lay on its surface.

"Just to ask you if you liked the chips you got from the vending machine?"

"That's what he started with," Henrik answered slowly.

"Hm... he definitely just wanted an excuse to talk to you. I would say that's an excellent sign," Lukas said, not taking his eyes away from his book.

Henrik wanted to refute that statement—What was the point of getting his hopes up? There was no point in indulging in fantasy. Tino was just outgoing. That's how he'd always been. He enjoyed meeting people and making friends.

But if that was true, then it was almost torturous.

Maybe he would've been better off if Tino had never approached them at all.

"... He's a friendly person," Henrik said.

"Come on, dude. Admit it, he totally has the hots for you!" Mathias groaned. "Just ask him out already! It won't kill you!"

The three of them glanced across the dining hall, looking over to where Tino was sitting, once again vibrantly chatting with his friends.

Henrik bit the inside of his cheek. Should he bother trusting Mathias? As thick-headed as he was, he always came out of every challenging situation with a smile. Could it be that trusting in him could cause the winning of Tino's heart?

Tino, at least, didn't seem to be afraid of him anymore. He was nervous, yes, but... he wouldn't have approached him so many times if he didn't want to be around him. And he wouldn't have always looked so disappointed when he had to leave.

And so, there it was again, that feeling of love that overtook him like nothing he had ever experienced. It felt like waves crashing over him, showing him something he had never truly known.

The past be damned. This was something entirely new.

This was nothing like what happened back then.

Nothing could compare to this.

"Can't ask him. Don't wanna come off as overbearin'," Henrik said a bit nervously, bringing his hand over to his arm and holding it across his chest. "I should wait for him to make the first move... right?" He felt himself sweating a little.

Lukas rolled his eyes. "Don't be a coward. That *was* his move. He approached *you*. It's your turn."

A brief silence filled the air.

"Do you think..." He paused, thinking for a moment. "... You think I should ask for his number at the party tonight?"

"Do whatever," Lukas said, his indifference returning. "*Mathias* will hold you to it, *right?*"

"I will?" Mathias asked with slight confusion, but grinning as his eyes met Lukas'. "Right! I will! You'll have Tino's number by the end of the weekend, Henrik. I promise it! On the honor of the North Sea!"

The sentiment was extraordinarily annoying, but still somewhat endearing. He would have laughed if he wasn't feeling so nervous. Henrik swallowed, pushing it down as he straightened his back, trying to invigorate himself with the confidence his friends were so desperate to instill him with.

Henrik removed his eyes from them, instead looking back up to Tino who was...

Waving goodbye at the table while his friends walked away.

And then, like a flip of a switch, that burst of confidence (if it had ever been there at all) deflated within him. He couldn't just sit here anymore, he was going to have to go up to him himself. Henrik felt beads of sweat forming on his forehead before he wiped them away with his forearm.

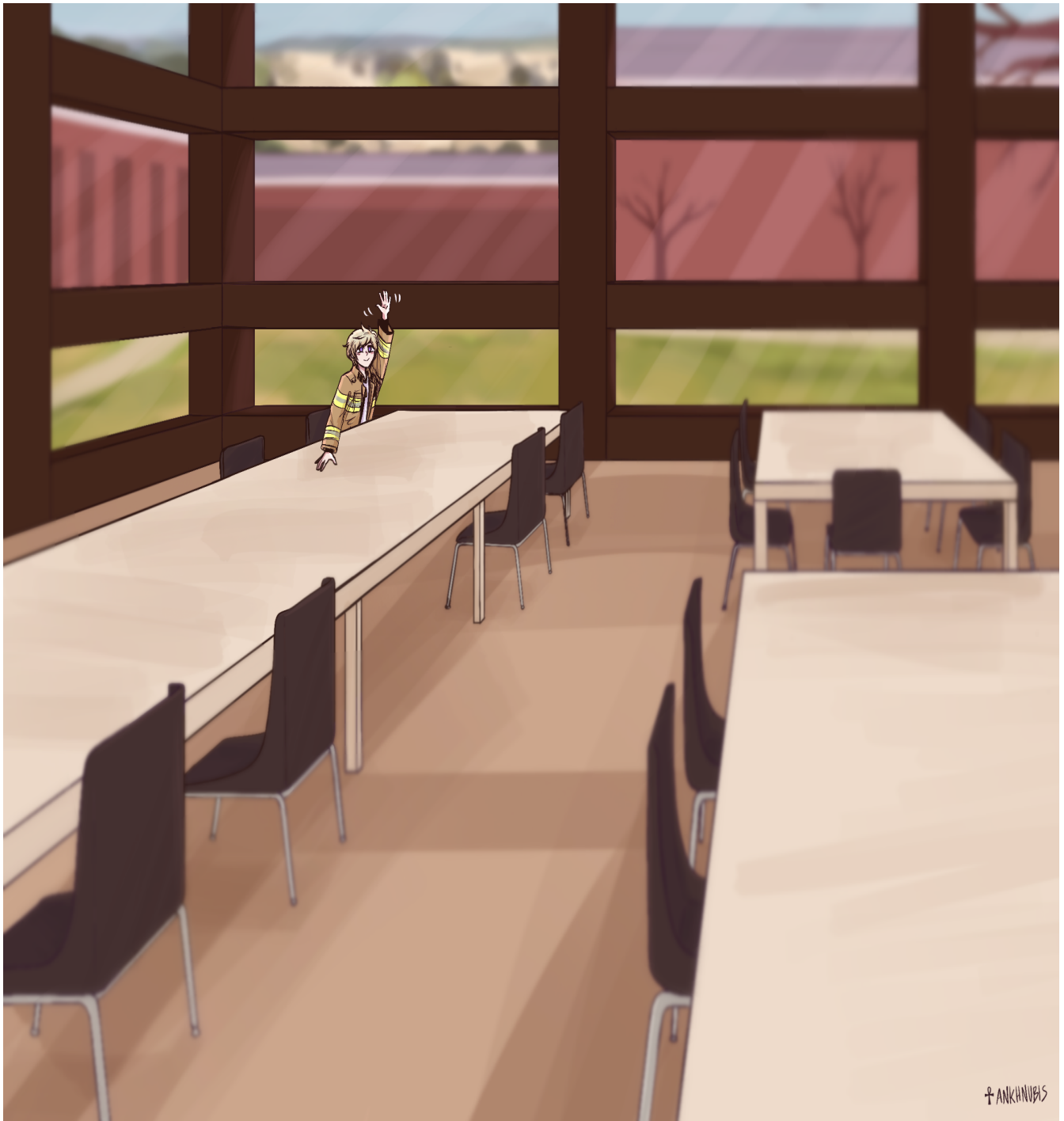
"Oh my god," Mathias complained.

"Should I go over to him?" Henrik asked, his breath feeling shaky.

"Obviously!" Mathias said, pushing at his belongings to shoo him away. "Go for it! Go get him!"

He felt his arms suddenly being shoved to wrap around his backpack as he was forced to a stand. Henrik knew he wasn't ready for it, but Mathias' hands pushed him forward, making him stumble slightly. He leaned over a little, but when he moved his head back up, he felt his whole body go under a cold sweat.

Looking up, he saw Tino making eye contact with him and waving him over sweetly.



He wanted to turn around, to run out of the room and flee while he still had the chance, but Tino's soft lilac eyes locked with his. He felt his mouth run dry, his breath catch, and a feeling of soft warmth overcome him.

How could he ever run from him?

And so, like a sailor to a siren, Henrik stepped forward to him, gladly taking his invitation.

But what could he say to him? What would he like to talk about? With every step he took, he felt a new pounding in his chest. He was getting too nervous, but he couldn't help it. How could he not? Tino was the love of his life, and he'd been getting more and more chances to talk with him. Chances that he couldn't take for granted. He was getting closer, but had absolutely no idea what he was going to say. He just wanted to be around him.

And so he stood there, towering over Tino's table and looking down on him. Usually, a person would have shrunk back and been afraid. But not Tino, not beautiful, sweet, perfect Tino. Instead, he smiled, patting the seat next to him.

"Um—Hi," Henrik said as he sat.

Of course, all of his overthinking had left him with absolutely nothing to say. He fiddled with the hem of his shirt awkwardly as he bent his neck in a slightly downcast gaze. Tino had gestured for him to sit next to him. Did that mean something? Was he trying to say that they were closer now? Well, obviously they were. They had actually talked now. But was he just being friendly, or was it something else?

"Hi!" Tino said, his words coming out as a bit of a nervous squeak. He coughed awkwardly as his eyes fluttered up to meet Henrik's. And the look he gave him—he could hardly take it. He was breathtaking. His large beautiful, his cute nose, and the way his words (even with such a heavy accent) sounded; he just wanted to lean forward and kiss him.

Obviously, he did not.

Tino was wearing a remarkably simple ensemble, just a plain white t-shirt, a pair of blue jeans, and that same jacket he wore every day. It made him look so small, so beautiful. His heart skipped again. He had to think of something to say, didn't he? Why not start there?

"Er... I like your jacket," Henrik managed with an awkward smile.

Tino looked down briefly and pulled at its sides. "Oh, thanks!" he said. "It was my father's. He was a fire marshal—taught me everything I know!" His expression darkened slightly. "He left me his jacket after he died, so I can hardly bring myself to take it off most of the time." Tino laughed humorlessly, and he scratched the back of his neck.

"Oh," Henrik said in a stilted and awkward manner.

He could've talked about anything—anything in the entire world—but leave it to him to start a conversation with Tino about his dead father.

"No, no, don't worry, it's okay." Tino said, immediately sensing his discomfort. "It happened a long time ago."

Henrik didn't quite know what to say, so he said nothing at all.

A beat of silence fell between them.

"Anyway," Tino began again, clearing his throat and tugging on his jacket again, "I've always been super close with my family, so they really helped me get through it, especially my grandfather." His eyes flicked up to Henrik's again, steadily meeting his gaze. "Are you close to yours?"

No.

Well, maybe that was harsh. But it's not like they spoke at all, and he definitely didn't see them... Not that he didn't want to.

"Er... Not really." Henrik muttered.

"Oh," Tino said, shifting a bit. "Well, that's okay."

More silence.

This really was a disaster.

Henrik began fidgeting with his hands, rubbing them back and forth before finally coming up with something to contribute to their conversation.

“What are you majorin’ in?”

Like there had never been a pause at all, Tino answered happily.

“Education!” he said with a smile. “I’ve always wanted to be a teacher, and I love small children. When I was younger, I worked as a babysitter. It was really rewarding even though it was hard work. I thought it would be nice to get to take care of kids for a job—I’d get to teach them too!”

Henrik felt his heart melt. Sweet, soft, lovely Tino, wanting to teach young kids. It sounded so perfect. Tino, who was quiet with nervousness, but said the nicest, most thoughtful things when he spoke. He could easily imagine him sitting in a classroom full of young children, reading to them and cultivating their love for literature in doing so, being a positive influence on so many people’s lives.

Literature wasn’t something that he particularly enjoyed for a reason he didn’t really want to get into... but he was glad that Tino could get something out of it—and it was definitely good that he’d be spreading his love for it to kids. Tino’s teaching would be very good for them, especially since he spoke another language. Those kids would probably get a kick out of that, even if they took a while to learn his last name. It’d taken Henrik a while to learn it, too.

Not that he’d ever admit that out loud, of course.

“I think you’d be good at that.”

“Really? Thanks!” Tino smiled, leaning back in his seat. “What about you? What’s your major?”

He suddenly felt boiling hot, with Tino looking at him like that. He didn’t flinch or turn away, simply waiting for Henrik’s answer. It felt... nice. Finally, someone outside his friend group who wouldn’t treat him like he was some kind of monster.

“Interior design, with a minor in woodworkin’,” he said. “Somethin’ I’ve always liked.”

Tino’s eyes drifted away from his for a minute, falling on his upper arms. “Woodworking, huh?” he said in a tone he wasn’t sure he recognized. “I think that suits you, too.”

Henrik absentmindedly tugged at his shirt sleeve, pulling it down as a shiver of nervousness ran up his spine.

“Thanks,” he said.

Tino didn’t respond; he seemed to be preoccupied. He was just sitting there, staring at Henrik with a light blush on his face. Henrik tugged at his shirt sleeve again, pulling it down lower in embarrassment.

“So... party’s later today. Mathias bought beer.” he muttered.

That snapped Tino right out of his momentary trace as he sat up straighter, now at attention. “Oh yeah! That’s right!” His lips curled up slyly as he snickered. “I’m so excited! It’ll be nice to have

something that's not hard liquor! It's all me and my roommates have been drinking for weeks."

Henrik was taken aback. Did Tino like to drink a lot? He didn't seem the type; not at all. Tino was so small and frail—hardly the kind of person you would expect to be a heavy drinker. Henrik let his eyes glance over at Tino again briefly, to see that he was indeed as he had thought. He furrowed his eyebrows as a hint of confusion slipped through his tone. "You drink often?"

Tino held his hand up to cover his smile while he laughed, batting the other as he answered, "Too much for my own good."

Well, he certainly hadn't expected that.

Not that Henrik minded at all, but it was... different. Although he supposed they *were* college students. Honestly—he should've known.

"You should be glad you didn't know me back when I was younger. I was... a bit out-of-control back then." Tino laughed in a dry tone. Just what was he implying? Henrik was about to ask, but he didn't get the chance, as Tino straightened himself out and regained his composure.

"Anyway," he interrupted himself sharply, "I was thinking of going to the library—"

Henrik pushed out his chair, knowing that it was time to go. He had to get back to his friends anyway, and he wouldn't want to bother Tino anymore with his presence. He had things to do, and Henrik had spent enough of his time.

"—So, do you want to come with me?"

Oh.

He hadn't expected that.

"Mm," Henrik grunted, unable to say anything else. He wasn't prepared for the question, so how was he supposed to come up with a suitable answer?

Tino stood, picking up his bag and throwing it hurriedly over his shoulder. He turned on his heels and began walking.

"Come on then, let's go," he said.

As they left together, Henrik turned to the side, shooting a glance at where his friends sat together. Mathias looked like he could hardly contain his joy with the enormous grin that sat on his face as he held up his phone—almost definitely recording the incident.

He rolled his eyes. Damn Mathias. Damn film majors. Damn the inventors of cell phones.

Lukas gave him a reassuring thumbs up.

With a nervous little smile on his lips, Henrik turned back, following Tino out of the room and outside of the building.

Tino's heart pounded relentlessly against his chest. He didn't bother to wait for Henrik, stepping quickly and digging his nails into his palms.

That was definitely too much. But fortune favors the bold, doesn't it?

He bit the inside of his cheek, and Tino glanced behind him for a moment, seeing Henrik quietly stepping behind him. Not that he thought he would leave, of course, more so he was worried that he was walking too fast and would end up leaving him behind. He took a deep breath, reassuring himself. He could do this. Tino slowed in his pace, falling in line with Henrik as they walked outside together. He was about to say something when he noticed something strange. All the surrounding people moved out of the way and quieted themselves as the pair of them walked by. It was bizarre—as they would return to what they had been doing as soon as they were once again out of sight. Tino brought his head up to look at Henrik, his stature unwavering, as he looked straight ahead, not acknowledging anything but their destination.

Tino couldn't help staring at him, eyes trailing to the strong jawline that made up his face. He wanted to reach out and touch it, to caress him with gentle kisses and run his hands through his straight golden hair. He felt a blush creep up his face as he imagined the warmth of his hands against Henrik's face. Tino cleared his throat, stopping himself from thinking about that fantasy.

It really wasn't like him, to find himself so lost in his affections. This... smitten feeling, it didn't seem right. He had never really experienced such heightened feelings like this. It wasn't like there was anyone he was desperately in love with back home. He sighed in exasperation that he—a grown man—was fawning over Henrik like a teenage girl.

"Hm?" Henrik asked, glancing down at him. "What's wrong?"

"Oh, um," Tino began a bit nervously, glancing around. "Nothing, nothing, it's just that—uh—all the other people are acting a bit weird, don't you think?" he asked with an anxious sounding laugh.

"Oh," Henrik said quietly, moving his eyes to the floor. "... Sorry."

Tino turned to him. "Huh? Why are you apologizing?"

Though Henrik didn't emote very much, it seemed like Tino's comment had made him upset. He looked to the side for a moment in what seemed to be a pained expression. "'Cause they're scared of me."

Tino stared straight ahead for a moment. It had never occurred to him that people had really been *that* afraid of him. Yes, people thought he was intimidating, but they wouldn't go that far... right?

"No, no way," Tino said, "that can't be right."

Henrik shook his head with certainty in his voice. "Been this way my whole life. It's me."

Tino chewed on the inside of his lip, his mind going over the unfairness of it all over and over again. Though they hadn't known each other very long, he could tell that Henrik was more than just a scary man with a glare. He was *much* more than that. But... hadn't he also had a somewhat similar reaction? He felt the disappointment in himself rise in his chest. He had judged him just the same. Poor Henrik didn't deserve this kind of treatment.

"Well, they're a bunch of assholes," Tino said flatly. "They have no right to treat you like that." Henrik's eyes widened slightly, but his face remained unchanged otherwise. "What?" Tino asked, "It's true! The way they're backing away—" he crossed his arms. "It's not right. They don't even know you." Henrik's eyes remained on him, his face once again returning to an unreadable expression as his back straightened. "It's unfair," Tino continued, gesturing with his hands. "If they knew you—the real

you—like I do, they'd give you a chance. I mean, it's really not that hard. And I know we've only gotten to know each other for a short while, but... it's ridiculous!"

Henrik turned his face to the side, hiding it behind his hand as he pushed his glasses up.

Tino stared up at him. "What? Is something wrong?"

"No, nothin'," Henrik said, clearing his throat.

Tino blinked at him a few times, but decided that he wouldn't question him further. When they reached the library, they stopped outside the building for a moment, admiring the large, dark wood doors. Tino reached forward and opened them, ushering Henrik inside with a smile.

"We're here!" he said in quiet excitement.

The two of them stepped inside together, side by side. The entrance was large and almost luxurious in its grandeur. Stone columns rose from the floor, supporting a large overhanging balcony that towered above them. The stairs were lined with well-used but still nice green carpet, and the sunroof above shone brightly with afternoon sunshine. The books lined every inch of every wall, some old and some new—some with tattered dusty covers and others with gold trim and shiny plastic covers.

Tino sighed happily in familiarity. "I've always loved this place," he whispered in a cheery tone. But Henrik didn't respond to him. His head angled upwards as his eyes darted all around the room, taking in every little detail.

"Mm."

"What's the matter?" Tino asked. "Haven't you ever been here before?"

"No."

Tino's eyes widened in shock and surprise. "*Really?*" he asked with just a bit too much emphasis. "But—it's the library! You must have!"

Henrik shook his head again, his expression stoic.

"Oh," Tino said quietly.

He hardly had thought it was possible and wondered where he had gone to study all these years. He looked up at him again, but it didn't look like he planned on elaborating any further on the matter. As confusing as it was, Tino supposed he wouldn't make him talk if he didn't want to. With a shrug of his shoulders, the pair of them continued forwards, walking up the stairs and setting their things down on a table that sat on the edge of the balcony. It didn't escape Tino's notice that Henrik picked the chair next to him, rather than the one across from him, and a subtle warmth filled his chest.

"... You do anythin' here?" Henrik asked, his voice deathly soft.

Tino raised his eyebrows in response, repeating the question in his head.

"Uh...read?" Tino said. He had thought it was pretty obvious.

"Oh," Henrik said, "Right."

Tino puffed out his cheek, unsure why he seemed so resigned.

“Do you read at all?” he asked.

“Not books,” Henrik muttered. “I have bad memories with it... I read what I need to get by, that’s it.” He lowered his head, not meeting Tino’s gaze as he fiddled with his hands in his lap.

It was hard seeing him looking so defeated. He could hardly imagine it—not being able to escape from reality in that way was almost torturous. Obviously, Henrik wasn’t illiterate or anything, but to be so bothered by something that he couldn’t engage in it at all? Tino’s heart surged with sympathy, and he leaned in a bit, putting his hand on Henrik’s shoulder comfortingly. He wanted to say something, but no words came to him.

Henrik looked up, their eyes meeting for a few fleeting seconds. They were close to each other, so close that a mere few inches separated them. Tino’s soft, lilac eyes meeting with Henrik’s piercing sea green ones. He hadn’t realized how close they were—breathing each other’s air like they could share it. Tino’s face flushed, and he backed away, dropping his hand and moving away from him.

“We don’t have to be here if you don’t want to,” Tino said, already moving to stand. “We can go somewhere else.”

But Henrik didn’t move, only looking up at him. “No,” he said, “I’d like to stay here with you.”

“Oh,” Tino breathed. His heart skipped, his face growing a significantly darker red. “Well, I was going to pick up some of my favorites. Is that okay?” Henrik nodded. “Do you want to come with me?”

“Mm,” he grunted.

The two of them stood up, walking together into the mass of library shelves. Tino was quick on his feet, already knowing where he wanted to go, having visited this place so many times over the past two years. If he wasn’t at the gym or at home, he was probably here, losing himself among the pages of books he knew all too well.

He stopped, standing in front of a large shelf of books. But when he turned around, he saw he was alone. Had he left after all? That didn’t seem very in character for him. Had he gone off somewhere? Perhaps he got lost along the way.

Tino retreated, retracing his steps and eventually finding that Henrik had veered off course. He had taken a wrong turn and had gotten lost. And though his face didn’t really show it, he seemed to be a bit frantic, looking all around him until Tino’s gaze fell on him. He quickly joined Henrik at his side.

“Sorry, sorry!” he apologized. “I didn’t mean to leave you behind!”

Henrik breathed a quiet sigh of what sounded like relief as he looked down. “Got scared I lost you,” he said lightly.

Tino let out a little laugh. “Don’t worry, I’m here. I wouldn’t leave you behind.” His eyes widened slightly. “—Not on purpose, I mean,” he added, realizing that he had done exactly that. “Come on, follow me. I’ll walk slower this time.”

Henrik nodded, not saying anything as Tino led him back through the shelves. When they arrived at where Tino had stopped previously, he took a bit of a step back, scanning them before spotting what he was looking for. The book he wanted was too high out of his reach for him to grab, much to his annoyance. Had they reorganized since he’d been here last?

“What are you lookin’ for?” Henrik asked, following Tino’s gaze. “That blue one, right there,” Tino replied, pointing up to it briefly before looking down. His eyes had fallen to the floor, trying to locate one of the many small step stools that often sat by the shelves. Finding one, he padded over to it and picked it up. He glanced over at Henrik again, who was now holding out a book in his hands. Tino brought the step stool to him and placed it to his side.

“This one?” Henrik asked, holding it out in front of him. “*Crime and Punishment*?”

“Um, no. The other blue book,” Tino said with a small chuckle.

Henrik said nothing, a tiny embarrassed blush spreading across his cheeks as he reached up and took a different book from the shelf.

“Yeah!” Tino said with a light smile. “That’s the one!”

Henrik held the book in his hands. “*The Great Gatsby*,” he muttered.

Tino hummed in response. “It’s one of my old favorites.” Henrik handed the book over to him. “Have you ever read it?”

“No,” Henrik said, glancing to the side. “Was supposed to... back in middle school. Never did though.”



“Oh—well, you should give it a shot! It’s a fantastic book,” Tino said, looking over the copy in his hands fondly. “I know a lot of people think it’s boring, but I’ve always loved the atmosphere. Gatsby and Daisy were my favorite characters—and I know that’s a boring answer, but I always found Nick

to be a bit boring. He's such a liar. My old copy had so many notes in it about that. I'd show it to you if they weren't all in Finnish." He laughed, awkwardly scratching the back of his neck.

"You like it that much?" Henrik asked in a low voice.

"Oh yeah," Tino nodded, "I think it was one of the first English books I read—mostly because it was so short, but I'm still really fond of it."

"... Want to read it together, then?"

Tino blinked, unsure if he'd heard him correctly for a moment before the words processed in his mind. When Henrik shifted to look at him, Tino quickly responded.

"Yeah, sure," he said with an awkward titter, "we can read it together if you like." Tino brought the book down from his arms, letting it hang loosely at his side. Was he weird for being confused? Didn't Henrik just say that he was basically traumatized away from reading before? Why was he so interested now? Tino knew he wasn't the greatest salesman in the world, but did he somehow sell him on the book? "We can start on it now if you want; it's pretty short."

Henrik only nodded, and the two of them once again set off, winding between the shelves until they emerged from them.

"I've always loved classic literature. I know it isn't for everybody but... something draws me to it... I'm not sure I could explain it." Henrik said nothing, only looking at him in encouragement for him to elaborate.

"My grandfather used to read to me all the time as a kid. And he also always loved to tell stories. He was a soldier in the war—the Winter war, so he would always tell me and my cousins about the battles he fought." Tino let out a soft sigh of admiration. "He always had just the right way of telling them. It was almost like you were there."

"Winter war?" Henrik asked, interrupting Tino from his train of thought. "My grandfather fought in that war, too. Swedish reinforcements."

Tino smiled excitedly. "Really?!" He could hardly believe it. What were the chances? "That's so cool!"

He felt his heart swell—but just a twinge. Was it possible that the two of them were more connected than he had thought? Could the pair of them have some shared familial history? Tino couldn't help but wonder. He was about to voice his thoughts when Henrik spoke again.

"Wonder if they met."

Tino glanced at him, meeting his eyes as they reached their table. "You know, I was just wondering the same thing! Tell me his name—maybe I'll recognize it! My grandfather's name is Zima Korhonen."

"Nils Hellström," Henrik said. "Sorry, don't recognize it."

"Aw, that sucks!" he said with a laugh. "I don't recognize yours either." He was slightly disappointed, but not much. Meeting someone who knew his grandfather would be ridiculous, wouldn't it? "Oh well," he smiled.

“Mm,” Henrik hummed in agreement. He looked like he was going to say something more, but was interrupted by the ringing of his cellphone in his pocket. He furrowed his eyebrows and gave Tino an apologetic look as he pulled it out. When he brought the phone to his ear, he didn’t bother to say ‘hello’. Instead, he waited for this mystery caller to talk.

“*Hey! Ricky!*” rang out the familiar voice of Mathias. Though the phone was pressed firmly to Henrik’s ear, Tino could still hear Mathias’ loud shouting.

“You gotta get back home! The whole fire department’s here and everything! I was just making some eggs and the next thing you know, the microwave’s on fire! And then, the entire room caught fire too!”

Tino tensed, grabbing for his bag before Mathias had even finished speaking.

“Luke-y is gonna kill us! I mean—me. You should get down here fast; might wanna try and save some of your valuables! Oh! He’s here! I gotta go—good luck!”

The line went dead.

Henrik didn’t look back at Tino as he stared down at his phone. His face was stoic.

Tino’s heart was racing, and his head felt light. He readjusted his father’s jacket, zipping it up tightly and grabbing his bag. He took Henrik’s arm and dragged him along.

“Come on, what are you waiting for? We need to go!” Tino practically shouted, throwing the library book down on the table as he pulled him along.

If Henrik had a reaction to that, he didn’t notice, not bothering to check behind him.

Chapter 5

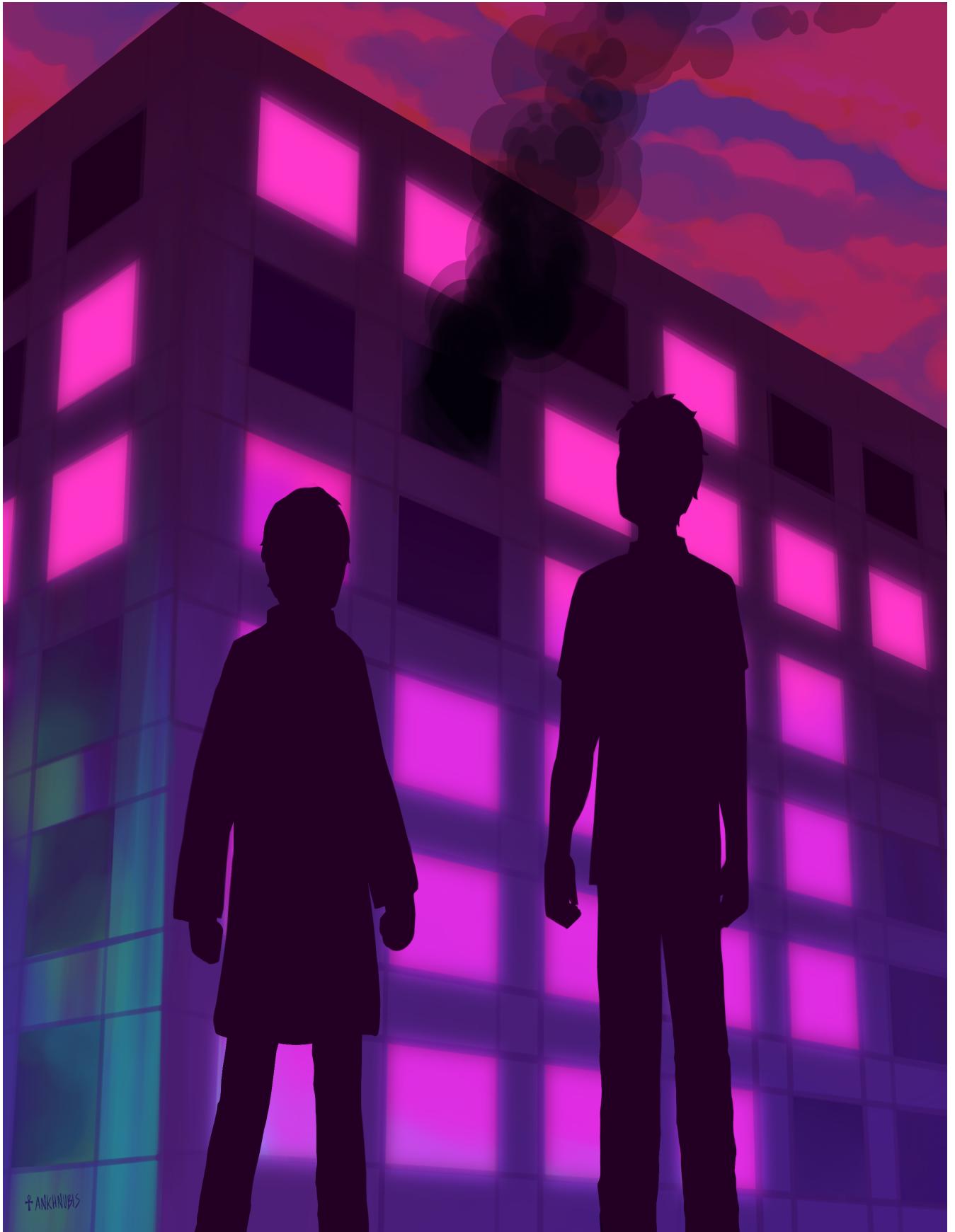
Chapter Notes



Normally, Henrik and Mathias' apartment building wouldn't have stood out among the crowd. It was actually quite plain. It was about the same height as the other buildings, and its color was dull and gray. He and Mathias had moved in together after high school, and sure he was accident prone, breaking things and being a general klutz. But he had never done something as terrible as this.

Henrik and Tino caught their breath together, their bags laying side by side on the pavement. They had been heavy, and they had practically sprinted over from the campus. Much to Henrik's surprise, Tino had kept pace with him rather well. Despite his shorter stature, the two of them could run with the same even strides. Did Tino run often? It was just another fascinating thing about him; something new to be added to his mental list of amazing things about the man he loved.

The sun was already setting because of the winter season, and the air was becoming slightly chilled with cold. The building itself wasn't exactly in ruins, but the parking lot contained several firetrucks and a large crowd of people—all trying to get a peek at what was happening. He could see dark smoke coming out of a particular window—his and Mathias' apartment, of course.



“I’m gonna kill him,” Henrik mumbled to himself.

Tino was quiet at his side. He stood transfixed on the burning building in front of him. The reflection of the flames danced in his cool lilac eyes while he remained deathly still.

“Hey, Ricky! Nice to see you buddy, and Tino, I didn’t know you were coming!” came Mathias’ voice. Henrik turned to see both him and Lukas approaching from nearby. Mathias bounded over to them happily, looking unperturbed and far too cheerful for someone who had just set fire to their apartment. It was almost unnerving. His phone—Henrik noted—was pushed snugly into his shirt’s chest pocket. Lukas wore a stoic face—nothing unusual for him—though upon further inspection, his lips were slightly curled in a twinged expression. “There’s no way we’ll be able to sleep in there!” Mathias said, smiling as he joined Henrik’s gaze.

“Mathias...” Lukas trailed off, his tone wavering slightly with worry.

“Aw, what’s wrong, babe?” Mathias asked, wrapping his arm around his boyfriend’s shoulder. Lukas pulled him closer, whispering into his ear.

Henrik shook his head, tearing his eyes away from the couple and once again letting them fall to Tino. He was still looking up at the fire, an unreadable expression on his face.

“Do you see that?” Tino asked, breaking the quiet. His expression remained completely still as he stared ahead.

Following his gaze, Henrik concluded he was looking between the 2nd and 3rd floors. He brought his hand up against his temple, leaning in to get some idea of what Tino was looking at. But he saw nothing. He wondered if he needed a new prescription as he adjusted his glasses. Was there something he was supposed to see up there? Figuring that he should say something, he finally choked out a weak response.

“Um... The smoke?” Henrik asked. “Looks bad.”

“No, no,” Tino said, batting his hand. He took several more steps forward, his feet dragging slightly against the pavement as he craned his neck upwards. His hands—as if on instinct—moved to the sides of his light brown jacket, pulling it on tighter.

A sharp animalistic cry ripped through the quiet air, distinctly sounding from inside the building. Tino immediately jolted, his eyes frantic for a brief minute, before he lowered his stance. And then Henrik could finally see what Tino had been so fixated on.

In the window of an apartment, on the third floor, was a small white dog.

Henrik felt his stomach tie into a knot, looking at the animal with waves of sympathy as his heart panged. He, like Tino, couldn’t take his eyes off it, watching with heated dread as the dog barked in a panic, scratching at the windows in desperation. Its howls were haunting, filled with almost human levels of emotion as the sound of its nails scratched against the protective wire frame of the window it was trapped behind.

Tino stepped forward again, pulling the jacket onto himself tightly, and hiding his face behind the collar. “I’m going in,” he mumbled. “Wait here.” Henrik hardly processed the words, and his heart seemed to stop as he watched Tino leap into a sprint towards the building.



“Hey! What are you doing?!” yelled Mathias, but Henrik took no notice of him, not taking his eyes off of his beloved as he tore through the dark parking lot. He wanted to reach out and stop him, but he

couldn't bring himself to move.

"Tino," he breathed, electricity seeming to zap and ripple through his body. His feet felt like they were made of stone, as if they had been melded to the very ground on which he stood, and his blood ran cold with dread.

Tino was leaving.

Tino was putting himself in danger.

Tino could get seriously injured.

He felt his heart roar back to life, pumping hard and fast against his chest.

He needed to do something. He needed to keep Tino safe; His sweet straw colored hair, his eyes of pure lilac. The image of him getting hurt ripped like daggers, a searing sick pain against his body. What if he got trapped inside? Tino needed his protection. He couldn't let him get hurt, not when Henrik was right there—able to prevent such an outcome. His body tensed, a feeling of exhilaration washing over him. He clenched his teeth—about to break into a run—when he felt a cool hand on his shoulder.

Lukas.

"Stop, we don't need two people dying in there," he warned.

Of course Henrik didn't listen.

He pushed the hand off, breaking into a rapid sprint towards where he had seen Tino disappear; he paid no mind to the frantic call of his name from his friends. Henrik knew it was a dumb idea—that he was putting himself in harm's way for someone who was basically a complete stranger. But this was Tino, the only love of his life. The answer to any question that came to his mind and the recipient of all his affection. He had never felt this way about anyone before. He was life-changing, and someone that Henrik couldn't live without.

He'd never forgive himself if something happened to him.

When he burst through the doors, he was immediately overcome with the taste of thick black smoke. The lobby of his apartment complex was almost completely dark, the only light being emitted from a green exit sign that hung from the ceiling. Not that Henrik really needed to see his surroundings, though; he knew this place like the back of his hand. He coughed a little, choking slightly on the smoke. With a fluid motion, he brought his shirt up to his face, placing it over his mouth and nose to aid his breathing as he continued to run. The building was—obviously—scorching hot and sweat drenched his forehead, dripping down his face as he tore further and further through the complex.

"Tino!" he called out, but no one answered. He ran for the staircase, his breathing becoming heavier as the smoke became thicker. His feet slammed hard against the ground with every step. Tearing open the door of the stairwell, he threw himself inside. It was getting hotter by the minute, and Henrik's body was screaming at him to stop as he climbed the stairs—to turn back and wait outside—but he knew he couldn't do that. He needed to find Tino, and he needed to bring him back to safety.

"Tino!" he called again.

But once again, he received no answer.

The smoke was getting thicker, his chest heaving with effort as he reached the top of the stairs. His head was becoming light. His coughing intensified. Leaning forward, he put his hands on the railing, attempting to support himself. But it wasn't enough. His choking only grew worse as he staggered forward.

But he couldn't give up—not when Tino was still in danger. Not when Tino still needed him.

He heaved himself back up, using the railing as an aid, as he continued to climb. His head spun and his heart roared with every step. He placed one hand over the other, and finally dragged himself to the base in between the second and third floor. But the smoke was only worse here.

His grip loosened on the railing. Falling to his knees, he coughed louder and harder, keeling over as his entire body shook. His vision became blurry as he finally collapsed to the ground.

He wanted to apologize, but found he was unable due to how hard he was coughing. Henrik held his hands to his throat, his eyes squeezed shut as he struggled desperately for more air. His throat was burning and screaming for relief.

But that was when he heard it. A loud scream of a voice, and the feeling of someone's arms wrapping around him tightly.

Using all his effort, he pried his eyes open. Tino stood kneeling over him, a small white dog nestled in his arms. His lilac eyes were wild and frantic. But even in his panicked state, he still looked beautiful.

"Tino," he choked.

He looked to be speaking—trying to answer him—but Henrik couldn't hear it, his ears roaring too loudly to comprehend what he was saying. He hardly processed Tino reaching for him, pulling his arm around his shoulder and dragging him to stand. His eyes opened and closed, blinking slowly as he was dragged down the stairs. When they were open, he could only see the face of his beloved, illuminated by nothing but the green light of the lobby.



The cold air outside hit him like a tidal wave. He gulped it in, his chest still heaving from his coughing fit. The overwhelming ringing in his ears was nowhere close to subsiding. His eyes fell

slowly to the side as they met with Tino's sea-green meeting soft lilac. The small dog in Tino's arms jumped from him, and Tino wrapped both his arms around Henrik's shoulders to support his weight. He was screaming words—words that he couldn't process or understand.

"Tino?" he choked. "You're okay?"

Henrik felt himself weaken, unable to support his own weight as he collapsed to the ground.

It happened all too fast.

Henrik collapsed in his arms and fell to the ground, his head hitting the pavement below with a sickening thud.

"Henrik!" Tino cried, falling to his knees in a desperate motion as he gently shook his weak body at the shoulders. But he didn't answer, his eyes remaining completely shut. The side of his head was glistening a light red as a small stream of blood flowed from it.

He had no thoughts in his mind, his body running on nothing but instinct as he pressed the side of his head against Henrik's chest, listening for a heartbeat. It was slower than it should be, but it was steady. Mathias and Lukas were soon at his side, rushing over to him from across the dark parking lot.

"Did he faint?" Lukas asked quietly, his soft tone laced with panic as he put his hand to Henrik's face, watching the blood trickle out of the wound.

"God, he's... he's fine—he's always fine. He'll be okay," came Mathias' shaky voice.

"I told him not to go in there," Lukas said weakly.

"He can't help himself when people are in danger. You know that," Mathias said, running a hand through his hair. It was falling out of place, and sat in his eyes. "Lukas, call an ambulance, god—fuck—please call an ambulance."

Tino didn't wait to watch Lukas as he did so. Instead, he threw his father's jacket off of him, tossing it carelessly to the side as he stripped himself of his shirt, leaving nothing over his torso save for the cross chain he usually wore under his clothes. Using only his hands, he ripped the fabric, tearing off a long strip and moving closer to Henrik's head. He tied the strip of fabric around the point of injury—a jagged cut on his forehead—to stop the bleeding.



“They’ll be here soon,” Lukas said, his voice so quiet it was almost a whisper. “They told me to stay on the line, in case of any updates.”

“Thank God—” Mathias said.

The pair of them were still speaking, but Tino hardly processed the words. The air was freezing cold, but he didn’t feel it—instead focusing solely on the man in front of him. He adjusted the makeshift bandage, making sure it covered the point of injury completely, his fingers brushing softly against his face. Even in such a wretched state, he still looked beautiful.

But his face... It felt cold. He was freezing to the touch. Henrik’s chest fell slowly and rose even slower. Tino’s eyes widened in alarm, leaning down as he checked his pulse again. His breathing was slowing down.

Tino couldn’t afford to panic; he wouldn’t allow himself to. His heart was pounding so hard that it felt like it could’ve leapt out of his chest. He stretched his arms out before knotting them together firmly over Henrik’s chest. Tino inhaled steeply, and then let the breath out before beginning to forcefully press down against his frame.

He needed him to come back—he had to. Tino’s chest heaved with the effort. “I’m sorry,” he said, muttering to himself in Finnish. His inhalations were growing heavier with each compression. “It’s my fault you fell. I should’ve been holding you tighter.” He pressed harder and harder against Henrik’s chest. “It’s my fault.”



But try as he might, Henrik didn't wake.

“Lukas,” Tino said, “tell them he isn’t responding to chest compressions.”

Lukas didn’t hesitate as he did so, and for once Mathias was completely quiet.

Tino brought himself back up, inhaling steeply once again. He had hoped that it wouldn’t have to come to this. He removed his hands from Henrik’s chest and moved up to be closer to his face. Sweetly, he cupped it in his hands, tilting it back to give himself better access. His hands caressed the softness of his skin for just a moment. He could feel his heart pounding relentlessly against his chest; his stomach knotting and twisting together tightly in anticipation. He pinched Henrik’s nose shut.

Surely, he wouldn’t mind.

He felt bad regardless.

“Sorry about this. I hope you’ll forgive me.” he whispered, wistfully hoping that Henrik could hear him.

With a gentle movement, Tino brought his head down. He inhaled steeply before pushing their lips together. The feeling was nothing like he wanted it to be. Henrik was limp, and the knots in Tino’s stomach only grew tighter. He had wanted to kiss him, but not like this. But now wasn’t the time to be thinking about something like that. He had a life to save. Tino blew the stored air into Henrik’s mouth, watching his chest carefully as it rose with his air. He didn’t dare remove his eyes from the man below him and repeated the process several times, pushing the oxygen into Henrik’s lungs until he ran out of air. That didn’t matter though, he would keep going for as long as he was able. He had to save him. It was his duty. After a while, Tino placed two fingers against Henrik’s neck, feeling his pulse much stronger than before. He leaned in closer, hearing Henrik’s short and quiet breaths of resuscitation. The relief that washed over Tino’s entire body was too much to describe, and he could only thank the Lord above for saving him—praying a few silent words in thankfulness.

Tino kept himself close, watching as Henrik slowly roused, his breath steadily regaining its strength as time went on. His respiration was slow and shallow, but eventually, his sea-green eyes opened and met with Tino’s. Henrik moved to sit up, but Tino gently pushed him back down. Mathias and Lukas looked like they were about to collapse with relief—their faces so filled with worry that Tino felt they might explode. Mathias leaned over to hug him, but Tino pushed him back with a forceful hand.

“Don’t crowd him! Back up!” Wordlessly, Mathias did as he said. Tino turned his attention back to Henrik and leaned over him. “Are you okay?” he asked.

“Tino...” Henrik said in a breathy whisper.

The sound of the blaring ambulance filled their ears.

“The paramedics said they’re here,” Lukas said quietly.

Tino only nodded in acknowledgement, not taking his eyes off of Henrik. He knew he shouldn’t, but he wanted to touch him; he wanted to run his hands through his hair and embrace him, to hold him tightly and exclaim that he loved him. Of course, that would be ridiculous. He placed a hand on Henrik’s shoulder.

“You’re safe now,” he said.

The world felt so quiet and still against his ears. He didn’t hear the paramedics approaching. Tino and Henrik’s eyes never drifted from each other’s. When Henrik was gently lifted from the ground, Tino

didn't dare leave his side, standing close by until he was brought into the back of the ambulance.

"Don't worry," came the soothing voice of the EMT. "He'll be alright." She stopped him, putting her gentle hand on his bare shoulder. "My name is Yekaterina. Can you tell me yours, dear?" Her short blonde hair blew a little in the icy wind, the 'x' shaped clip being the only thing preventing it from blowing into her face. She had large baby-blue eyes that blinked calmly at him through lightly colored lashes.

"Uh—Tino," he squeaked.

She smiled at him in an encouraging manner. "Thank you for your help, young man." came her soft whisper, her words hitting like frost on his ears. "Don't worry. You've done all you can." Perhaps she had more to say, but she held her tongue, moving away from him and stepping into the back of the ambulance.

And Tino too could say nothing, only able to watch the ambulance tear out of the lot with its sirens blaring, leaving Mathias, Lukas, and himself behind as they stood together in complete silence.

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes



It had happened all too fast.

Tino stood quietly with his arms at his side, not bothering to shield his bare torso from the cold. Mathias and Lukas were also silent as they lingered nearby, saying nothing as they stared ahead, their hands locked together tightly, like they were afraid to let go of each other. The tension that emanated from the three of them hung heavily in the air. None of them wanted to be the first to speak as they stared off into the night, their eyes lingering on where the blaring ambulance had left from.

Tino bit down on the inside of his cheek and knotted his hands together, wondering why Henrik had followed him. He'd told him to wait, hadn't he? His fingers danced together tightly, pressing firmly against each other until he was squeezing them so tightly that he felt a slight pain. He felt his breath quickening as that familiar craving came to him again, but he shook his head, knocking the thought aside as he brought a hand to his lips and took a deep breath.

The soft pitter-patter of small paws finally broke the tension on the concrete. A quiet bark filled the air as Tino felt the warm body press against his legs. He looked down at it, still stiff in his stature as it yipped at him. The little dog from before, who was now pawing at him to pick her up.

"Oh," he breathed. He reached down and brought her into his arms, holding her tightly against his chest.

"Nice dog," Mathias said weakly.

"Thanks." Tino squeezed her tighter.

He wanted it all to go away—for him to open his eyes and be back at the library. The desire to return to its cozy atmosphere—to be sitting and reading with Henrik like he had planned to. His stomach knotted and twisted. He wanted to yell, to scream, to cry out, but he did no such action. Instead, he stayed still, letting his eyes linger for a little longer.

"Please be okay," he mumbled under his breath.

"Does she have a name?" Lukas asked, his voice quiet and fragile, like a deathly whisper.

Tino ran his hands through the dog's fur, but found no collar.

"I don't think so..." he said.

"That must mean she's yours then, right?" Mathias laughed with a hollow sound.

"No," Tino objected immediately, "she belonged to someone." Despite his words, he found himself unable to let go of her. He squeezed her tighter and ran his hands through her soft fur. She happily responded to that, yipping softly in his ear and licking his face.

A silence fell between the three of them again. Other than the faint chattering of Mathias' teeth, it was completely quiet. Lukas was the first to move, closing his eyes as he walked away from the sight.

"Come on, let's go." He looked over at Tino before he quickly added, "—To my house. We can get some rest."

Tino didn't have the energy to argue, his very psyche feeling heavy with emotion. He simply nodded and turned on his heels, heading back over to where they had left their bags. The dog wiggled and squirmed in his arms, but didn't break loose. Her fur was puffy and white, and her black nose shone a

little in the darkness. She was an excitable little creature, and must've only weighed nine or ten pounds. He didn't know her breed, and even if he did, he doubted he'd be able to pronounce it.

Tino slid his jacket back on, glad to have the cover of fabric over his bare chest as he adjusted it. With a scant breath of relief, he threw his backpack over his shoulder and gingerly held Henrik's bag in his free arm. Internally, he thanked the lord above that they were untouched and still clean from sitting on the ground like that for so long.

Henrik's backpack was very cute too, much unlike his own drab black one. It was a soft yellow Kånken bag with red accents and was embroidered with white flowers. Upon studying them closer, Tino concluded they were twinflowers, something he easily recognized from his home country. They were very common in the region, but something told him that Henrik had probably embroidered them with Sweden, rather than Finland, in mind. Despite how he looked, he was very soft. He'd probably be the type to spend hours on a simple project like this and not even bother to show it off when he was finished. Tino liked that about him.

His chest fell, remembering where Henrik was now. It left a pit in his stomach, heavy and immovable as he felt the fabric in his hands. He ran his gentle fingers over the embroidery thread, caressing the careful handiwork. It was incredibly detailed, especially for such a small design. He hugged the bag to his chest, allowing it to be a minor comfort in such a demoralizing situation.

The dog in his arms licked his cheek. He hugged her tightly, too.

A car horn sounded off nearby, bringing Tino away from his somber thoughts.

He turned, looking over to see Lukas' car, an old sort of gray minivan. With little else to do, he went over to it, giving the backpacks to Mathias as he'd surrendered the front seat to him. He didn't ask why, rather he silently accepted the gesture. The little white dog stayed in Tino's lap as he sat down, curling up against him and laying down on his legs.

Once again, the three of them were drenched in quiet as Lukas pulled his car out of the lot. Even though Lukas' car looked old, it still ran well enough. The seats were made of a soft fabric, and the interior was spotlessly clean. Well, all except for the cupholder on the passenger side door. It was filled with small candy wrappers—which Tino figured must be from Lukas' little brother.

He knew little about the boy—mostly because Lukas wasn't really one to talk about his personal life—but he knew a couple of things. He knew his name was Emil, that he was still a junior in high school, and that even for a boy of sixteen years, he was still incredibly shy. Tino hoped he wouldn't mind the intrusion on his home.

The road was almost empty, and the sky was completely dark—without a single star twinkling above them. Tino hardly noticed—his mind still running rampant with incoherent, busy thoughts. And even though he knew they weren't there—and that it wasn't even his car—he still unconsciously reached for the glovebox.

He straightened his back against the seat and turned to look out the window, running his hands through the dog's soft fur and internally scolding himself for thinking of such a thing. Honestly, he felt ashamed; it had been awhile since he had craved that feeling. But he shook it aside. That was the past—and he was different now.

Mathias cleared his throat from the back of the car. When Tino turned around, he saw he was playing with the straps of Henrik's backpack.

“You know, throughout middle school, and... a fair amount of highschool, Henrik and I didn’t get along that well...”

Tino turned back to look at him.

“We picked on each other a lot. One day, I got a pair of scissors and snipped this strap off his backpack.” He pulled the offending strap up so he could see. “I did it when we were walking in the hall, and it fell to the floor and all his stuff tumbled out.” Mathias smiled fondly at the memory. “Y’know what happened the next day?”

He paused, looking at Tino for a moment before continuing.

“That nerd had sewn the strap right back together.” Looking at it closely, Tino could just make out the use of a slightly off-coloured group of threads. Henrik had found a good color match—so good that it was almost impossible to notice that it was different at all without prior knowledge.

“Unbelievably sturdy, this thing...” Mathias muttered.

The car fell quiet again before Lukas filled it with his voice.

“And your message is?”

“The point is that Henrik’s a stubborn bastard who didn’t buy a new backpack after I tried to ruin it. That big, stupid nerd went home and fixed it himself because he likes doing that—he likes taking matters into his own hands. He doesn’t like giving up!”

Tino reclined in his seat with a brief sigh.

Lukas responded with a curt scoff and a roll of his eyes. “You’re talking about a backpack.”

“Okay! Okay!” Mathias said with a defensive raise of his hands. “What I’m trying to say is that he’s going to be fine! He always has been, and he always will be! He sure as hell never let me get to him, no matter how hard I tried.”

To that, Lukas seemed to agree, as Tino noticed him pulling his eyes off the road for a moment to look at Mathias through the rearview mirror, a faint smile on his lips.

“For once, Mathias is right,” he said, returning his attention ahead of him.

Mathias smiled softly at that, looking over at Lukas with a fond expression. “Henrik always bounces back,” he said, giving Tino a reassuring nod of his head. “Sure, he’s in the hospital and not the nurse’s office, but... same difference, right?” he joked weakly.

Lukas scoffed a little, leaving Tino unsure if it was a laugh or some vague noise of disapproval.

“What Mathias is trying to say is that we’ve seen him get hurt before. It never took long to get him back up and walking again.” He looked over at Tino with a soft expression. “Let’s not worry too much...”

Tino couldn’t think of a response. Instead, he nodded, pulling the dog closer against his body. She panted happily in his ear, licking his cheek and wagging her tail. He was grateful for her unwavering positivity, even if she was only a dog.

“Do you mind if I play some music?” Tino asked.

Lukas shrugged slightly. “Go ahead.” He reached down blindly and produced an aux cable from the console. Tino took it from him and turned to the back of the car, to face Mathias, who handed him his backpack. He heaved it into his lap, ruffling through it to pull out his phone. When he pulled it out, though, he was saddened to find that a large crack ran through the front of the screen. But when he clicked it on, it still lit up. Nothing internal seemed to be damaged.

“What happened to your phone, buddy?” Mathias asked, leaning forward and looking over Tino’s shoulder.

He sighed. “I probably smashed it when I put my backpack down earlier.” A frown sat heavily on his lips as he traced the point of breakage with his finger.

“Aw, that’s okay,” Mathias said. “You can just get a new one! That one looks pretty old, anyway.”

“No, it’s okay,” he replied with a weak wave of his hand. “It still works fine.”

Mathias shrugged. “If you say so.”

Tino plugged his phone into the aux cable and reclined against the seat, letting the dog wiggle up against him and hold herself close.

The speakers in the car were quiet; Lukas must have been the type to only listen to music in the background as he drove—more as ambiance than entertainment. Despite that, he heard the distinctive clicks of the audio dial being turned up.

“Hatrið Mun Sigrá?” he asked. “You didn’t seem the type.”

Truthfully, Tino hadn’t bothered to check what song had come up. “Oh, yeah.” His eyes trailed over to look at him. “You don’t mind, do you?”

“Not at all,” Lukas said with a soft smile. “Not at all...”

Tino heard an excited cheer from the backseat. “This is that weird BDSM techno band that you and Emil listen to, right, babe?”

Lukas rolled his eyes. “It’s not BDSM Mathias, it’s art—and they’re not a band, they’re a multimedia performance project. They’re destroying capitalism.”

Tino furrowed his eyebrows. “You guys recognize this song?” he asked.

“Of course,” Lukas responded, “This will probably be Iceland’s most defining entry yet. Maybe not as iconic as Finland’s 2006 win, but, hey, it stands out.” Tino felt his heart warm at the mention of his home country, a sweet feeling of pride emanating from him.

“Emil’s Icelandic, so Luke-y here is sorta obligated to listen to Hatari,” Mathias said from the backseat, leaning forward and affectionately patting Lukas’ shoulder.

It didn’t even take Tino’s confused glance for Lukas to explain. “My little brother—he’s from Iceland. After my parents divorced, my dad and I moved up to Iceland. He met my step mom there and then they had Emil. After a bit of living there, we went back to Norway, though. And of course—we ended up here after a couple of years. Our family moved around a lot.”

“Oh, I see,” Tino said.

“Isn’t it crazy?” Mathias exclaimed again. “It all started the fateful day I moved here from Denmark at the tender age of five,” he gave a short whistle before continuing, “then over the years came the Swede, then the Norwegian and the Iclander...” He leaned forward and patted Tino on the shoulder as he finished, “And now the Finn! We finally got the last piece of the map!”

It took Tino a moment to process what Mathias had said. Did he mean he was now a part of their little group? Maybe such a thing was too soon—he hadn’t even met ‘the Iclander’ yet—but his heart still swelled at the implication. He felt happy—happy and honored to be included.

“Last piece of the map, huh?” Tino whispered to himself quietly. He brought both his hands up and scratched behind the dog’s ears, finally relaxed in their presence.

“We’re not collectables, Mathias,” Lukas said with a long exhale. But Mathias wasn’t paying attention to him, and his hand remained firmly on Tino’s shoulder.

“Woah, dude, how’d you get so jacked?!” He exclaimed, feeling his arm.

Tino cocked his head, unsure of what he meant.

“You know—your muscles!” Mathias said as he leaned back to properly sit in his seat.

“Oh,” Tino exclaimed, feeling his face redden as he turned to look straight ahead. He laughed awkwardly and scratched the back of his neck.

Lukas scoffed in apparent disapproval. “Leave him alone,” he said.

“Aw, but come on, babe, weren’t you surprised too?” Mathias protested, looking over at Tino again. “I had no idea you were so strong—pulling Henrik around like he was nothing—I still can’t lift him all the way, but you could! And where’d you learn to do CPR like that?”

“Oh, well, I trained to be a firefighter back home.” Tino said, tugging on the sleeves of his jacket. “My father was the fire marshall, so he taught me everything he knew. He wanted me to have those kinds of skills, in case of an emergency.”

“A firefighter?!” Mathias exclaimed. “That’s amazing!”

Tino only nodded a little. “Thank you.”

It’s not that he particularly minded talking about his father, it was more of what came after that; How drastically everything changed and how quickly he was expected to recover. He was the only child, and the only son, and his grandfather and mother expected him to be the next figurehead of the family. All of that weight caused him an enormous amount of stress. It was a pressure he couldn’t stand on his own.

So he turned to other things to help him cope.

Tino bit the inside of his cheek, commanding himself to stop thinking of such things. He let one arm fall off the dog’s small body as it tightened into a fist. He dug his nails into his palms, trying to get his mind off of it.

Lukas seemed to notice, turning to him with a small amount of concern. “Are you feeling alright?” he asked.

“Yes,” Tino answered immediately, “I’m just... thinking about some old bad habits...”

“I understand the feeling,” Lukas said.

They locked eyes for a moment, tragically similar histories shared through nothing but a glance.

“You too?” he asked.

Lukas only nodded.

“What do you mean?” Mathias questioned brashly. “Bad habits?”

Tino shook his head. “It’s nothing.” He didn’t need to explain himself, not when Lukas quietly understood.



The man next to him gave him a reassuring pat on the shoulder, then returned his hand to the steering wheel. The music faded, and the silence returned once again as the car was brought to a gentle stop. Lukas stepped out of the car, retrieving his backpack from the back seat from Mathias. Tino did the same, gathering his things from the car as the little dog wiggled happily in his arms. He readjusted his backpack over his shoulder.

Lukas' house was pretty average, a two story home that was painted a light gray. It had a couple of windows, but there was only one light that was on inside. Tino figured it must be Emil's room. The garden in the front looked very well taken care of, and even though no flowers were present in the beds, the soil inside was rich and fresh. The front lawn was nicely mowed too, and the small path that led up to their house was decorated on the sides with tiny, two-inch houses. Tino had to be very careful not to step on those. He could only wonder what they were for. His home didn't have a driveway, and Tino immediately took notice of the lack of any other cars.

Did Lukas and his little brother live by themselves? He had thought that they'd live with their parents, considering that Lukas hadn't moved out—and there was no way he could own a home at his age... Was Lukas taking care of Emil all on his own, too?

It was a saddening realization, one that stuck in the back of his head. It's not that Lukas liked to talk about his personal life. If he spoke at all, it was always about either fishing or philosophy, which always made Tino think he was an old soul, as some people call it. But to know that he was taking care of a kid when he was only a few years older made a lump form in Tino's throat. He shouldn't be taking care of his brother all on his own, not when he was presumably forced into this situation. Their family should be here for them, and yet, they were nowhere to be seen. Lukas was very strong—much stronger than he'd ever be.

Mathias rushed to the front door, riffling through his pocket for a moment before producing a small silver key. After a bit of fiddling with the lock, he swung the door open and ushered everyone inside, his teeth chattering against the cold. When Lukas passed through the door behind him, Mathias pressed a soft kiss on the top of his head. Tino ran his fingers through the dog's fur, longing for such a thing but knowing that he couldn't have it—though he wished it could be from someone else. He shuffled at the front door, sliding off his shoes and fiddling with the sleeves of his jacket as he was led through the house.

The interior of Lukas' home was practically spotless. The three of them stood in the entry room, which was a large open space with only a breakfast table off to the corner. To Tino's left was the kitchen—small and quaint, with tiles decorated with little whales. Directly in front of them was the staircase, and walking past it was the living room. Mathias and Lukas brought him to it, whispering softly to each other in what sounded like a strange combination of Norwegian and Danish. Lukas wore a sort of worried expression on his face as he looked into Mathias' eyes.

The living room was decorated with a large, brown, L-shaped couch that was pushed against the wall. Directly across from it was a small coffee table and further than that was a fireplace with a TV mounted above it. Normally, Tino would have sat down, but seeing that Mathias and Lukas were still engaged in their strange conversation, he awkwardly shifted his weight to the side. With a quick kiss to Mathias' forehead, Lukas turned away from him and looked to the stairs, calling out in an unfamiliar language. He understood the word 'Emil', but nothing else.

A small creak and the soft pitter patter of steps were heard from the floor above.

"What are you doing back here?" came the questioning voice from upstairs. It wasn't one of sharpness, more confusion. "I thought you were going to Matt-y's place."

The lithe form of the young boy appeared at the top of the stairs. Emil was strikingly thin and pale, with messy white hair that almost fell into his eyes as he walked. He was wearing a simple ensemble: a knitted black winter sweater and a pair of pajama pants that pooled heavily at his ankles. His phone was clenched tightly to his chest and had an Icelandic flag on it. Emil stepped down from the steps cautiously, his enormous violet eyes (which were doubtless the result of some form of albinism) never once leaving Tino as he sat down on the living room's couch.

“Who’s that?”

Tino waved at him awkwardly, hoping that he didn’t mind the intrusion on his home.

“My name’s Tino—”

He was cut off by Emil. “Where’s Henrik?”

“Henrik is in the hospital,” Lukas answered bluntly. Emil’s eyes widened, but he kept his mouth shut. His face became lighter as he sat there. “Mathias was being an idiot and caught their apartment on fire. Tino ran in to save that dog,” he gestured to it loosely with his hand before continuing, “and then Henrik ran in after him.”

“He’ll be fine,” Mathias said before Emil could respond. “Ricky will be back here before you know it! He’s just takin’ an overnight trip.” He sat down next to Emil on the couch, affectionately wrapping his arm around his shoulder in a comforting grip. “I bet he’ll be up and ready to come home by tomorrow!”

Emil tensed slightly, still looking up at Tino apprehensively. With what he knew now, he could only bring himself to wonder how Emil had dealt with it all. Tino gave him a small smile in response and walked over to him, holding the dog out in his arms.

“Here,” he said softly, “Would you like to hold her?”

With a small deal of hesitance, Emil reached his hands out and took the animal from his grasp, but she didn’t seem to like it and wiggled away from him—yippling in what sounded like distress as she jumped down to the ground and ran back over to Tino. He picked her back up again. And even though the dog had rejected him so harshly, he seemed to have appreciated the gesture.

“So... Henrik was just being stupid?” Emil asked.

“He... was being Henrik, for sure,” Mathias said with a short, little laugh. “But who could blame him?”

Tino blushed and awkwardly scratched the back of his neck, wishing he had something to say.

“I’m going to go make us some dinner, alright?” Lukas said shortly, clearing his throat. He walked around the room, kissing a very resistant Emil on the top of his head, and a very happy Mathias on the lips. He rounded the corner and disappeared into the kitchen.

Emil huffed in annoyance at his brother and looked at Mathias with a snarky sort of expression. “Why do you have your phone in your pocket like that? You look like a middle-aged dad.”

Mathias looked confused for a moment, patting the pockets of his shorts as he felt around for it. Realizing it wasn’t there, he stiffened for a second before he reached for the pocket in his shirt—likely just remembering that it was there. But when he looked at the screen, his breath hitched and his eyes widened.

“Holy shit,” he breathed.

Tino felt his body tense at Mathias’ reaction. “What?” he asked, “What is it?”

“My phone—it’s been recording this whole time!” Mathias exclaimed.

“What?!” came Lukas’ voice from the kitchen. Having heard them, he made his way over, wearing a white apron at his waist. He wiped his hands on it before approaching the three of them. “Were you really?”

“Yeah!” Mathias said, “Check it out.” He held out his phone, playing it from the beginning.

“Have you been taking your medication?” asked Lukas, an anxious look on his face.

“Yes! Yes! Of course babe, don’t worry, I wouldn’t miss a dose!” Mathias responded. The camera lurched forward a little as Mathias patted Lukas’ shoulder.

Mathias’ face flushed, and he sped the video forward. “Ah, sorry, you probably shouldn’t’ve heard that,” he said, embarrassed. No one said anything about it, and Mathias found a new spot for the video and let it play.

It was a back angle shot of when Tino was giving Henrik CPR. His face warmed in his embarrassment, and he turned away, deciding that he’d seen enough. He didn’t want to relive that moment any longer. He had wanted an actual kiss, not this. One that was mutual and shared and not the result of Tino trying to save him. ‘Trying’ because he had done an excellent job of that, complete with dropping him directly onto the pavement. If he’d been better at his job, he could’ve been safer, and they could be sharing that actual kiss right now. Hell, maybe they’d have moved the party over to Lukas’ house and they could be getting drunk and dancing to shitty music. And Henrik would be safe, holding him tightly and glad to have him back in his arms where he knew he was protected. Tino blushed at the thought before pushing it away.

He couldn’t help but react that way—Henrik made it easy. He was far too pretty, with beautiful shining eyes hidden behind rectangular frames. His shoulders had been very firm to the touch. He must’ve made a habit of going to the gym often, just like Tino himself did. He couldn’t help but be awestruck every time he saw him. The sweet, golden hair that he wished he could run his hands through and lips that he so desperately wanted to kiss. It also didn’t help that the man was shy—timid even—and that he was very gentle with almost everything he did. He was just... wonderful. Yes, it was the perfect word to describe him. Just... a wonderful man.

“Man, Henrik’s going to—,” Mathias laughed. Lukas interrupted him by clearing his throat before rolling his eyes.

“Oh,” Mathias said. He slid his phone back into his pocket. “Anyway, I bet you guys wanna know how it happened, huh?” He reclined back against the couch.

Emil leaned forward slightly in interest, his hands locking together as he listened.

“Y’see, I was cooking eggs—since I figured we’d need some food for the party—and we only had snacks in the pantry. So I cracked the eggs in a bowl and I put them in the microwave. But also—apparently you aren’t supposed to have silverware in the microwave? I’d left the spoon in there since I was whisking the eggs. Anyway, it was an old machine—I thought the flames were normal. It got kinda out of control and the fire department was called or something, so I gave Henrik a heads up.” Mathias began gesturing wildly with his hands as he continued, “I called Lukas too, and he came over super quick, asking if I was alright and stuff. Then Henrik came with Tino and we all stayed and talked for a while before he saw that little pup in the window. Tino ran into the building to save it, and then Henrik decided Tino needed saving too and ran after him. But it turns out that he was the one who needed saving, so then Tino came out holding both Henrik and the dog like a real hero. But then Henrik fell onto the ground and got a gnarly gash on his forehead and then he and Tino started making out—” Lukas hit Mathias softly on the back of the head.

“It’s not the time for jokes,” he said harshly.

“I—I was actually just doing CPR,” Tino interjected, flushed in embarrassment as he petted the dog in his lap.

Lukas walked over and nudged Tino gently with his hands. “Hey, ignore Mathias. He’s just trying to lighten the mood. Unfortunately, he also doesn’t know when things are appropriate to joke about.” He began walking back over to the kitchen. “Dinner will be ready soon.” He turned to look over his shoulder. “Emil,” he called, “can you show Tino to the guest room, so he knows where he’s sleeping?”

Emil’s back straightened in protest. “Wha—hey!” But Lukas was already gone, having disappeared into the kitchen.

He looked over at Tino with a shy, flustered expression as he stood. “Come on then,” he mumbled. Tino quickly joined him, desperate to flee from Mathias’ presence.

Emil’s steps were careful and soft as he led Tino past the stairs and to the left, turning down a short hallway to a small room in the house’s corner. He opened the door and held his arm out, gesturing for Tino to proceed inside.

The guest room was almost completely empty, save for a spare closet, a twin set of nightstands, and a king sized bed that was pressed up against the back wall. The carpet was incredibly soft—possibly a sign that this room hadn’t been used much, and the window that was on the left side of the room filled the place with a drenching moonlight. Emil flicked on the light with a switch on the wall.

“There’s a bathroom around the corner, if you want to shower in the morning,” he said. Tino nodded to him, walking inside the room and finally pulling his backpack off and putting it on the bed. His hand once again stroked the dog’s soft fur.

“I’m sorry for intruding on your house like this,” Tino said quietly, walking over to him. “I know it must be weird.”

“You’re far from the first stranger he’s brought home,” Emil said darkly, his eyes going to the floor for a moment before they locked with Tino’s. “But that was a long time ago, and I’d rather have someone like you here than someone like them.”

Tino nodded his head in understanding, knowing that he had been right.

“Glad to be here then,” Tino said with a warm smile.

Emil turned away from him, batting his hand a little as he responded, “Yeah, yeah, whatever.”

He and Tino went back to the living room, leaving his backpack behind. When they returned, Mathias was flipping through the channels on the TV. He patted the spot next to him, inviting the two of them to sit down on the couch.

They both complied, sitting on Mathias’ either side as they joined him. Bizarrely, the dog moved in Tino’s grasp so that she wasn’t touching anyone but him. Mathias once again wrapped his arm around Emil’s shoulder, and Emil leaned in on him in return, but only ever so slightly. It was a kind of strange sight, seeing them leaning on each other like that. They must be very close. Mathias looked so happy, and the miniscule smile on Emil’s lips assured Tino that the feeling was mutual.

“Did you do your homework?” Mathias asked.

“It’s Friday,” Emil complained.

“You should be sure to do it then! That way, you can relax on the weekend!”

Emil huffed and rolled his eyes, resettling in his seat, leaning in closer on Mathias’ shoulder. “I don’t want to.”

To that, Mathias let out a low chuckle, rubbing his arm against Emil’s shoulder. “Why not?”

“You know,” he mumbled, cozying up to him more. Mathias laughed.

Tino hadn’t really considered that Mathias would have that kind of role in Emil’s life. He almost seemed to be this kind of father figure, wanting to be there for Emil when he needed him. Tino could only wish that he’d had someone like that after the passing of his own father. He squeezed the dog in his arms, pulling her close to his face as she panted. She licked his face and nipped at his cheek, barking a little.

“Emil, do you and Lukas live alone?” Tino asked.

Emil answered with a bored expression, “Yeah, well—other than him.” He readjusted against Mathias’ chest. “Our parents are almost always out of town on business, so we’re on our own most of the time.” That made sense. Tino could only breathe a small internal sigh of relief that it wasn’t as bleak as it could’ve been—though it was still a hard situation.

“Oh,” Tino said.

Mathias was about to say something, but was interrupted by Lukas’ voice as it sounded from the kitchen.

“Dinner,” he called.

“Coming!” Mathias yelled excitedly. He quickly stood and raced over to the kitchen, leaving Tino and Emil behind. The two of them watched him go for a moment before moving to stand themselves. The dog leapt away, standing by Tino’s heels as the two of them followed Mathias to the kitchen.

“You know, I think you’re pretty strong.” Tino said.

“H-huh?” Emil stuttered, surprised by the compliment. “What do you mean?”

“I just—” he thought for a moment, trying to come up with the right words. “It takes a lot—to go through all that you have. I think you’re strong for that,” Tino said as they arrived in the kitchen.

Emil turned a soft pink, averting his eyes as he tugged at his sweater sleeves shyly. “Oh, thanks, I guess,” he mumbled. Lukas and Mathias looked over at the pair of them from the dining room table and laughed, exchanging a kind of knowing glance that Tino couldn’t decipher.

“Oh, shut up!” Emil said, hustling over to the table and sitting across from his brother.

“But, Emil, we didn’t say anything,” Mathias said, laughing again.

The three of them looked like such a perfect little family—albeit a non-traditional family—but still a family. They just seemed so comfortable together. Tino felt his heart fill with an incredibly sappy feeling just by looking at them. He laced his hands together, twiddling them as he allowed himself to stare for just a moment.



“Come on, sit!” Mathias yelled, waving him over with his hand. “You’ll love Lukas’ food. He’s a really good chef!”

“Oh—um—coming!” Tino said, scratching the back of his neck as he smiled.

The hospital was cold.

And dark.

Cold and dark.

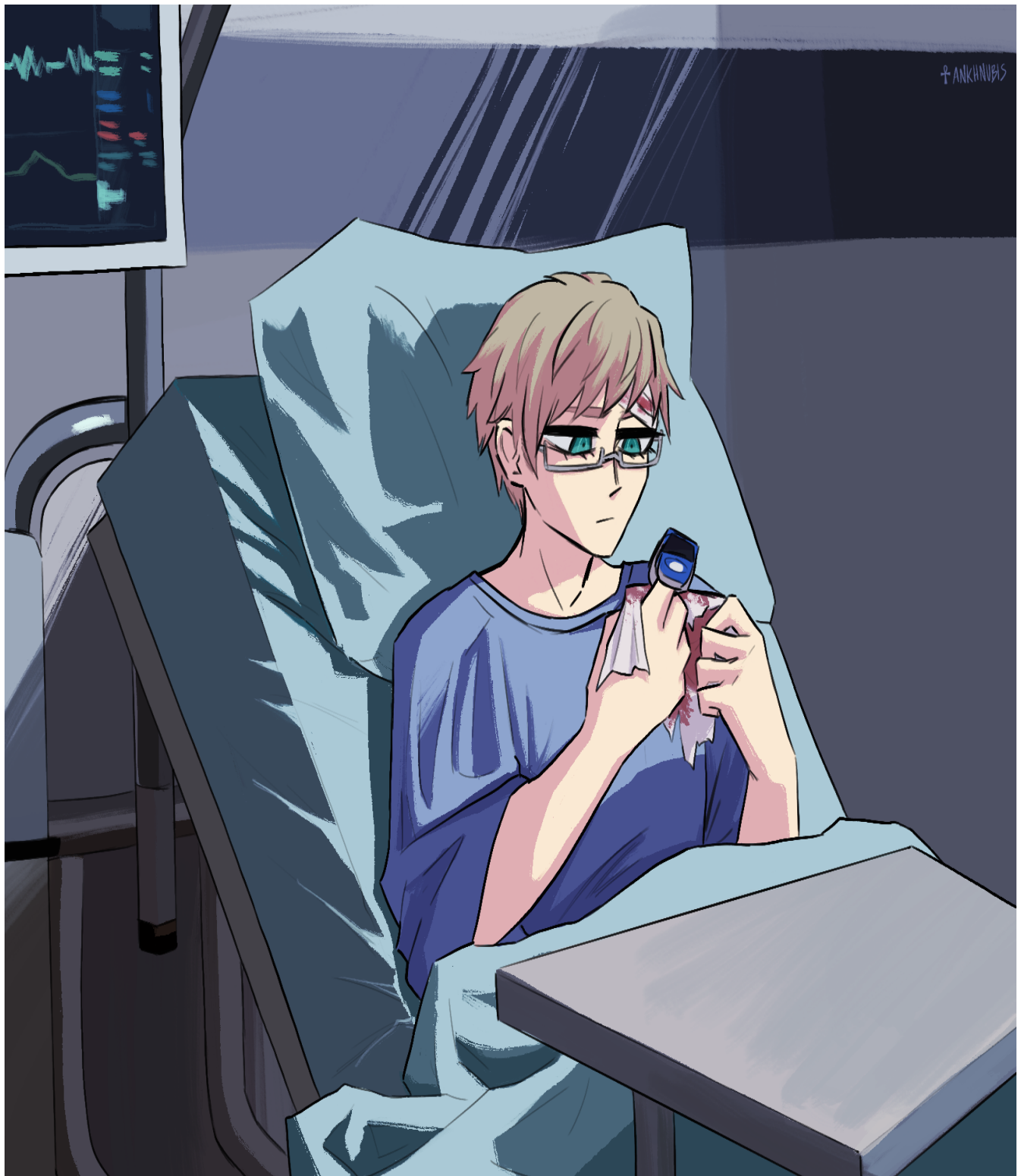
The nurses had left Henrik alone for the night, having seen that he hadn't maintained any serious injuries. The hospital's staff advised him to stay overnight, just in case something came up in the morning, and though he doubted something would, he still stayed. He didn't really have a place to sleep anymore.

Well, other than Lukas' house.

He shivered.

He rubbed his hand against his forehead, at the spot where Tino had apparently wrapped his shirt around the wound to stop the bleeding. It was covered in bandages now, though they would probably come off in the morning. The nurses had said that it would scar. Henrik shook his head, leaning against the hard pillows as he turned to his side, the thin sheets of bed he lay in hardly being a comfort against the cold.

He brought his hand back down to the small bundle that sat at his waist. Though it was darkly soaked with his own blood, he clutched to it tightly. It was that scrap of fabric Tino had used to stop his gash from bleeding.



He knew he was probably angry with him—or at least upset. Maybe he even hated him. What did he know? It was amazing what one phone call could do, because he asked them not to come until tomorrow. Henrik wouldn't have to know how they felt, how mad they were at him, how stupid he was. At least, not for now. Rather he could let all those thoughts wash over him as he considered them himself. He clutched the fabric closer to his chest, holding it over his heart. He could only hope that something like that wasn't the case. It was unquestionably an impulsive decision, but he had felt such a strong need to protect him. But Tino hadn't needed it, and Henrik ended up hurting himself by trying to provide it. What had he been trying to accomplish? Tino was stronger than he had thought.

Hopefully, he wouldn't hold this mistake against him, and they could go back to whatever they'd been doing before. Henrik wasn't sure at this point if it was actually flirting or if it actually was Tino just being friendly. Whatever the case, though, he would just be happy to be with him again. When he was with Tino, his heart beat like it never had before. He could feel its burst of life, like a beautiful song he had only wished to hear. He'd finally been permitted to listen, after an entire life of longing, but only when Tino was around.

His cheeks warmed, and his heart ached.

Tino.

Sweet, perfect, incredible Tino.

He shivered slightly in the cold and pulled the blankets around him tighter. Henrik wanted nothing more than to see him again. To apologize for what he had done and say he was sorry for being so rash. He was sure that he'd disappointed him, and he was desperate to make it right.

But he wasn't sure he knew how.

He reached over, his arm leaving the thin warmth of the hospital bed to the little table that was next to him. Feeling around for a moment, he picked up his phone and brought it back to him. He clicked it on, but recoiled when the bright white light hit his eyes.

It took a short while for his vision to adjust, but when it did, he opened his internet browser. Typing for a few seconds, he allowed the page to load. Almost immediately, he was hit by a long list of links and many images.

Your search for 'Finland' yielded 526,000,000 results in 1.23 seconds.

Henrik straightened his back in the hospital bed.

He had a lot of reading to do.

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes



When Tino stepped out of the shower that morning, he felt a bit dazed. He rubbed at his eyes with the back of his hand as he pulled on his clothes, thankful that he had thought to pack some extra. He had ended up sleeping over at someone's house—even though it wasn't the one he intended.

After pulling on his shirt—a plain black t-shirt that was several sizes too big for him—he pulled on his jacket before going to grab the dog that was sleeping on the other end of the bed. She was sleeping soundly, curled up in a ball with her head resting on her paws.

It was kind of strange how she didn't seem to want to be with anyone other than him—how she'd bark and whine if she were placed in anyone else's arms. He didn't really get it, but he was glad at least the dog had an attachment to him. Though she'd probably be much happier with her actual owners. He sat down on the bed, patting her head and scratching her behind the ears. As cute as she was, and as much as Tino wanted to keep her, he knew that she'd have to go back home. It wasn't right to keep her any longer. They were probably worried when they couldn't find her after the fire last night. The little dog shifted under Tino's hand, waking up with a short little sneeze.

“Good morning, girl,” he cooed. “Sleep well?”

Being a dog, she obviously didn't answer, instead only panting at him and wiggling into his arms to demand more of his attention. Tino held onto her tightly and stood, swinging his backpack over his shoulder as he left the guest room.

After leaving, he was immediately greeted by the warm scent of the early morning. The birds were chirping outside, and the sunlight shone in from the windows, their light cascading into the house and lighting the otherwise quiet abode. Normally, Tino would've taken the time to relax and enjoy it, but he couldn't, considering what was coming today.

Last night, after dinner, the four of them decided on a plan—in the morning they would first go to the local animal shelter to drop off the dog and get her checked for a microchip. And after that, they would go to the hospital to see Henrik.

It made his heart pound with anticipation. With such a thing coming up so soon, he could hardly sit still, running his hands through the dog's fur nervously. He walked around the first floor, but saw that no one else was around. When he arrived in the living room, he sat down on the couch; the dog moving to rest comfortably in his lap.

Mathias and Lukas had stayed up pretty late with him last night, as they busied themselves with idle chatter about their classes before retiring to their room. It was strange how much like an old married couple they were. But, he supposed that something like that came with being in a relationship for five years. They basically already lived together...so why hadn't Mathias moved in? He couldn't help but wonder about it. Was it that there was some kind of unspoken boundary that kept them apart? Probably not. They seemed to be very open with each other. But then why? He stroked the dog's fur in bewilderment.

He shook his head, clearing his mind from the question. It wasn't his business what they did in their relationship. It's not like he'd had one after all. Tino leaned his full weight against the couch, stroking the dog in his lap. She wagged her little tail, padding onto his chest and licking face.

“Hey,” Tino laughed, “Stop it, girl.”

“You're a real lady killer,” said Lukas sarcastically as he came down the stairs.

Tino's eyes widened. “I've never killed any women!”

Lukas' eyes softened in a short little laugh before he walked towards the kitchen. "It's an expression," he said. Tino stood and followed, the little dog trailing after him.

"Oh," he said, his face flushing in embarrassment.

"I was joking with you, because she—a female dog—was licking your face. I was joking that you were good with women," Lukas explained dryly, going to the pantry and pulling out a box of pancake mix.

Tino laughed loudly, tilting his head back. "Me? Good with women?" he repeated. "You're hilarious."

Lukas shrugged, not saying anything as he brought a red and blue mug over to the coffee machine and messed with it until it produced an even stream of fresh coffee. "Is it really that funny?" Lukas asked.

Tino shook his head. "I wish I could be," he said, "But I don't think I could be with a woman if I tried."

Lukas stopped in his motion, turning to narrow his eyes and look over his shoulder. "In what way?" he muttered. "Not a fan of relationships?"

"No, no, not at all!" Tino said. "I'd love to be in a relationship one day. I've never had one before." He laughed awkwardly, scratching the back of his neck. "You know—not that I didn't want one, of course, because I did—I mean, I do, but you see my late teens were hard for me so I didn't want one at the time and," his face was red, clearly embarrassed with his inability to keep his mouth shut and speak concisely. "I'm gay," he said abruptly.

"Oh," Lukas said, sounding more surprised than he thought he'd be. "Sorry, I see now," he said. He took the two mugs of coffee into his hands. "Congratulations then."

"Um—thanks," Tino said, flustered.

Lukas gestured to the pancake mix, his hand still tightly wrapped around one of the coffee mugs. "Would you mind making that for me? I have to run this coffee up to Mathias."

Tino nodded awkwardly. "Sure," he said.

"Thanks," Lukas replied. He rushed out of the kitchen, slinking up the stairs before Tino could get another word in. He stared blankly at them for a moment before looking down at the little dog.

"Well, that was weird," he said to her.

She said nothing, mostly because she was a dog.

Instead of letting it linger in his mind any longer, he turned to the stove, ready to face his immediate task. He began sorting through cabinets until he found a pan he could use. Unfortunately, Lukas had neglected to tell him where everything was, so he was forced to search around the kitchen for everything he needed. Luckily, though, it wasn't too hard, and after a while, he was standing over a pan of beautifully golden pancakes.

He hadn't been cooking for very long when Lukas descended the stairs again, holding only the red mug. He joined Tino in the kitchen, standing by his side. "Thanks for your help," he said. "I can take over now."

"No, it's alright," Tino said, "I got it."

Lukas shrugged, putting his empty mug in the sink. “Mathias will be very excited; he’s always loved pancakes.” He huffed a small laugh.

“Is he still upstairs?” Tino asked, not taking his eyes off the stove.

“Yes,” Lukas said affectionately, “though I doubt he’ll be for much longer. Right now he’s styling his hair.”

Tino nodded his head, and wordlessly, Lukas left, probably going to make sure that Emil was awake.

When he first found out that Mathias and Lukas were a couple, he was bewildered; especially after hearing how long they had been together. They were complete opposites; Mathias with his boundless energy and loud voice, and Lukas with his quiet thoughtfulness and reserved nature. But it didn’t take long for Tino to understand. Even though Lukas would scoff and pretend to be annoyed, it was easy to tell that he adored his boyfriend, and Mathias wasn’t ever afraid to hold his hand and declare his love for his ‘Luke-y’. They were sweet, and they loved each other very much.

Looking down at the pan in front of him, he scooped several pancakes up with his spatula and put them on a little plate beside him. Pulling down a plate from the cabinet above him, he put a few fresh ones aside for himself.

Maybe one day he could be like Lukas, too.

“Oh, dude, Tino,” came Mathias’ cheerful voice from the stairs, “are you making pancakes? I love pancakes!” He bounded over, his freshly styled hair sticking up in the air as he excitedly leaned over the stove. Lukas said nothing as he followed, simply putting the 2nd mug in the sink.

He was wearing a new set of clothes—a gray t-shirt, a red jacket, and jeans. But where had they come from? As far as Tino knew, he didn’t pack anything extra... and there was no way that Lukas’ clothes would fit him. He must have a stash here. It only made sense. Where else would he have gotten them?

“I hope you like them,” Tino said, placing a few more pancakes on the stack he’d been making. Mathias took a few from the bottom of the pile in his hands and walked past Tino, going to the coffee machine and opening the cabinet above it. He took out a glass of water, filled it up, and popped a few pills into his mouth before chugging the glass and taking a large bite of his pancake.

Tino quickly averted his eyes, refocusing his vision on the pancakes cooking in front of him. That wasn’t any of his business. He heard the dishwasher open, and the chimes of plates clinking together. Lukas came up next to Tino, leaning against the counter as he watched Mathias put away clean dishes in the cabinets.

“Is Emil awake?” he asked Lukas.

He nodded, “He’ll be down soon.” he said.

Mathias approached from the other side of the room. “Excuse me,” he said to Lukas, who moved out of the way so Mathias could put some dishes in the cabinet above his head. Lukas put his hands to Mathias’ waist, holding him there briefly until everything in Mathias’ hands was put away. When he was done, he kissed him on the cheek and walked back over to the dishwasher.

It struck Tino how much the two of them loved each other. But if Lukas could grow past it, then so could he—even if it was unfamiliar territory.

Tino flipped the last of the pancakes onto the plate and turned off the stove, handing Mathias the now dirty pan before going back to the counter to enjoy the spoils of his labor. He brought the plate he had gotten for himself to the table and sat down. Lukas and Mathias soon joined him, sitting across from him with their own plates. The three of them sat quietly for a bit, the birds lightly singing outside as the morning light waned, the sunbeams being blocked as white clouds passed over them.

Tino looked over at them, once again wondering to himself why they hadn't moved in together once again. They were basically a complete family; Mathias even had a house key! So it confused him that they'd failed to make such a critical step. Their family, brought apart by such a minor detail... it left Tino with a puzzled look on his face as he ate.

Lukas studied him for a moment. "You've got something on your mind, haven't you?" he asked.

Tino shivered.

"Oh—no, it's nothing," he lied, batting his hand.

Lukas only had to respond by raising an eyebrow.

"Aw, come on, Tino," Mathias said with a radiant smile. "What's up?"

"I, uh—" Tino stuttered, fiddling with the sleeves of his jacket, "well—"

"You're wondering why Mathias and I haven't moved in together, aren't you?" Lukas finished for him. "I suppose I don't blame you; it's kind of strange."

Tino blushed a bright pink. "Uh—yeah," he mumbled.

"Ah," Mathias said, leaning back against his chair. "Well," he began, looking at Lukas for a moment before continuing. "You see—Henrik and I have been living together since, like... the end of high school. And—" he ran his hand through his hair, "It wouldn't be fair of me to move out, you know?" Tino gave him a confused glance.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"Well, you know how it is... People think he's scary. He wouldn't be able to find a roommate if he searched the ends of the Earth. People have always been afraid of him. I tried to move out before but..." he trailed off a bit, looking at Lukas for a moment before bringing his eyes to Tino's. "It just didn't work out."

Tino felt a heavy feeling settle at the bottom of his heart.

"It's not that he isn't welcome to live here with us," Lukas said, bringing his elbow to lean on the table as Mathias continued for him.

"He doesn't really like this house." A dark look crossed his face before he continued, "It's just better for all of us if we stay like it is for now." But that wasn't possible now. The apartment had gone up in flames. He hadn't seen the full extent of the damage. Maybe their apartment was fine...?

"I see," Tino said.

Did people really fear Henrik that much? The idea was almost unfathomable to him. Henrik was anything but that. He wasn't scary! He was just a bit intimidating! Sure, he wasn't the easiest to understand, but that didn't mean he was heartless! But Tino knew he was also being hypocritical.

He'd been scared of him once. And even though it made his heart ache to think about, he still had to remember that. Yes, he'd judged him in the past, but he loved him now. That should be enough... right?

His thoughts were interrupted by Emil descending the stairs and appearing in the kitchen.

"Morning," he grumbled, taking a couple of pancakes on a plate as he sat down next to Tino.

The rest of breakfast was eaten in relative silence, save for the sound of the anxious tapping from the floor.

When they finished, Mathias took their plates from them. "Let's get going, huh?" he said with a soft smile as he brought the dishes to the sink. "Ricky's probably waiting for us." When he came back, he was holding a little container of tupperware. He put the remaining pancakes inside before holding it at his side. "I'll bring these for him, for a little snack."

They all stood. Wordlessly, Tino left the kitchen, going back to the guest room for a moment and picking up his backpack, then going to grab the dog.

"Come here, girl," he cooed, "let's get you back home." Softly, he brought her into his arms and met the others in the entry room. With a simple nod to each other, they left the house and piled into the car.

Mathias had brought Henrik his backpack, including some extra clothes, just so that he had all his things. He and Lukas sat in the front seats, leaving Tino and Emil to awkwardly sit next to each other in the back. Tino was going to say something to him, but the boy was too engrossed in his phone to even acknowledge him. Other than the soft panting of the dog, the car ride was almost deathly quiet.

When they arrived at the animal shelter, Tino was the only one to get out.

"I'll be fast," he reassured them before rushing inside.

The sign outside the shop read the words 'Hearts and Paws Animal Shelter' in large blue lettering and was decorated with a small image of a cat and a dog. Tino gripped his own dog in his arms and pushed open the door. It was a quaint little place, with beige tiles and light blue wallpaper with both dogs and cats on it. In the middle of the room was a little counter with a short man behind it. To his left there were a few shelves lined with different kinds of foods and toys. Tino squeezed the little dog in his arms, wishing that he could keep her, but knowing that he couldn't.

"Hello," he said as the man turned around.

The man was wearing a simple t-shirt and jeans, and his black, raven hair fell down to about his ears. His eyes were monolid and colored a deep brown—so dark that they almost lacked any color at all—but despite that, they were filled with a distant sort of warmth. He recognized him as Kiku Honda from their university, though he didn't know him very well.

Kiku greeted him with a friendly wave. "How can I help you?" he asked politely.

Tino walked over to him, his steps sliding against the floor in a futile attempt to get himself to stop. He couldn't help it. He didn't want to give her up. What he really wanted to do was hold her tightly to him, to bring her back to his home and keep her forever. But that wouldn't be right. She almost definitely had an owner, and he didn't think his roommates would appreciate him suddenly bringing home an animal. With an internal sigh, he placed the dog down on the counter.

“I was wondering if you could scan her for a microchip,” Tino said, still running his hand through her fur. “She didn’t have a collar.”

Kiku nodded. “Of course.” He reached to take the dog from the counter but hesitated when Tino’s hand remained on her.

“Oh, sorry,” Tino apologized, moving away a bit.

Kiku simply waved the apology away before taking the dog in both his arms. She squirmed, seeming uncomfortable, but Kiku still held to her. “Leave me your contact information and I’ll let you know if I find anything.” He readjusted, pulling out a small stack of post-it notes for Tino to write on. He quickly did so, leaving his phone number on the pad.

With a nod between them, Kiku turned towards the back of the shelter, the dog in his arms whining softly as she was brought away.

Tino turned, bringing the sleeves of his jacket down over his palms as he exited the building and went back to the car.

“I’ll be back for you,” he said to himself, knowing that he probably wouldn’t. It felt nice to say, even though he would probably never see her again.

He opened the car door with an effortless movement, slipping back into his seat.

“All taken care of?” Mathias asked, turning around to face him.

“Yeah.” Tino replied.

Mathias gave him a little smile before nodding to Lukas, who shifted the car’s gears and reversed out of the lot. This time, instead of a peaceful silence, the car was filled with a tense air. None of them knew what condition Henrik would be in when they arrived there. Mathias and Lukas were speaking to each other, once again in that weird combination of their languages, and Emil had pushed himself against the door of the car, texting vigorously with someone. Henrik will be okay. Tino assured himself. He shifted in his seat, pulling at the silver necklace that lie around his neck.

Emil interrupted his thoughts with a loud and uncharacteristically boisterous laugh.

“Who are you texting?” Lukas asked sharply, not taking his eyes off the road.

Emil stopped laughing, shyly pressing his phone to his chest. “Oh—um—” he readjusted in his seat so he was leaning against the car door more. “No one.” Lukas looked back at him, a firm line pressed into his lips before turning back to refocus on the road. Mathias chuckled a little at the interaction, putting his hand on Lukas’ shoulder and patting him in a soothing manner.

“Stop that!” Emil demanded.

Mathias raised his hands defensively, turning back to look at Emil. “We didn’t say anything!”

“You were thinking something. Stop doing that, I don’t like it.” Emil huffed.

Mathias gave a little chortle of a laugh, shaking his head and returning his eyes to the front of the car. “Alright, alright.”

The car returned to silence, and other than the occasional laugh from Emil, it remained that way for the rest of the trip.

As for Tino, he couldn't keep his thoughts off of Henrik, his mind racing with images of him. He was just too beautiful—too amazing, too wonderful. Every time he closed his eyes, all he could picture was piercing sea green, hidden by silver rectangular frames. Was it his fault that Henrik was in the hospital in the first place?

He shifted in his seat, turning to the side as he stared out the window. Mathias and Lukas seemed solid in their belief that Henrik would have followed him into the fire regardless, but... he couldn't stop himself from taking the blame. He should've told him about his training sooner; he should've told him more firmly to stay behind; he should've held him tighter when they left the building. If he had said 'no' to Mathias' initial invitation, he probably wouldn't have been making food for the party, meaning that the apartment would've never caught fire in the first place. Tino felt himself sweating, instinctively bringing his hand to his lips as he breathed in a sharp inhale.

Maybe everything was his fault.

When they arrived at the hospital, Lukas parked the car close to the front.

"Alright," he said with a quick sigh, "are we all ready to go?" Everyone nodded and exited the car. Mathias and Lukas met each other at the sidewalk, and Lukas reached out his hand, silently asking for Mathias to hold it. He obliged. Emil and Tino walked side by side, down the short pathway, to get to the hospital. He didn't bother to take in his surroundings, looking down and twiddling his fingers together in nervousness and anxiety.

He could only hope that Henrik wouldn't be upset with him.

With each step he took, his heart tugged and pulled at his chest; it was growing hard to manage. He'll be okay, he reassured himself. He'll be fine.

"Are you alright?" came Emil's timid voice.

"Ah—yes," Tino responded, jolting his head upwards. "Yes, sorry—I was just... I just hope Henrik's okay," he said.

Emil nodded a little. "Don't worry," he said quietly, "I'm sure he'll be alright."

They caught up behind Mathias and Lukas, who held the doors of the hospital open for them as they entered. His head was pounding against his skull. Henrik wouldn't be upset, and he would be okay. He had gotten him out of there. He bit down hard on the inside of his lip.

He wouldn't lose someone else.

He was too anxious to do anything but walk forward. How could he focus? It was all becoming too much. It didn't help that the hospital was loud, too.

It was all too loud.

His pace quickened as he followed behind Mathias; he seemed to already know where he was going. That was good, at least.

He brought his hand to his face and chewed at his nails.

Henrik would be fine.

He wrung his hands in his pockets.

He was strong. He'd be okay.

He tapped his fingers against his skin.

He would be just fine.

He couldn't sit still.

He couldn't bring himself to listen when Mathias and Lukas were chatting with the receptionist and was only able to shakily write his own name on the nametag. He didn't take his eyes off the floor.

"Tino? Are you okay?" Lukas asked in a worried voice. The elevator dinged as it shut.

Wait, since when had they been in an elevator? He felt himself begin to shake.

"Uh—yeah—yes, I'm fine," he stuttered. Lukas didn't look convinced in the slightest. Emil stared over from his phone with a concerned face, but he didn't seem to know what to do, only backing away and letting Mathias and Lukas approach.

His breaths were becoming more shallow, and his vision blurred. He brought his hands up to his neck and clutched at the cross that hung there, holding it until his knuckles turned white. His body was shaking and he could hardly see a thing. The world spun.

It overwhelmed him. Everything felt smaller—like it was closing in and consuming him.

It was his fault.

It was all his fault.

"Here," Lukas said gently, "lean against the wall." He pushed him a little, so that Tino was forced to take a small step back and do so. "Deep breaths." he closed his eyes and followed his instructions.

Tino felt Mathias' hand on his shoulder as he breathed. "Steady," he whispered. "You're okay." His respirations became deeper and longer. The tightness in his chest subsided, and he brought his hands away from his chest to rest against the wall.



A wave of calm washed over his body.

He allowed himself to rest there for a moment, steadying himself and his breath.

It was okay.

He was okay.

“Thank you,” he said when he pulled himself back from the wall. “I needed that...”

Mathias rubbed his shoulder. “Of course! You looked like you were having a hard time.” His words wore soft as he looked down at Tino with a fond expression. “Luke-y and I have your back.”

They were just too sweet. Reaching forward, he pulled Mathias into a soft embrace. “Thanks,” he said again.



“Aw, no problem, buddy,” Mathias said with a short laugh, stroking his back and pulling him close. Mathias was strong and held to him firmly. His embrace was warm, but it wasn’t too tight, using just the right amount of strength to make it comfortable. Tino couldn’t help but want to hold him closer, burying his face in his chest and taking in his slight scent of a fresh, salty ocean. Mathias wrapped his arms around his upper back, Tino did the same. And as strange as it was, he found himself unable to

let go. Mathias understood; Lukas did too. And that was enough for him, he decided. Their embrace loosened, but Tino held Mathias' arm to his shoulder, not wanting him to let go. He needed the touch of another person to ground himself. The elevator came to a stop on the third floor.

"Come on then," Lukas said, "let's go see him."

Henrik ran his hands through the sheets of the hospital bed. The nurses had cleared him to go home that evening, but still insisted on him wearing a clamp on his finger—something that would monitor his heartbeat. It filled the room with a monotonous beeping sound. He stared ahead at the empty white room. There was nothing of note around, only two white chairs and a window that lay directly across from his bed. Cruelly, it was too far away for him to see anything out of.

He pulled his glasses off his face, folding them and placing them down on the table at his side—right next to his phone. He didn't want to look at the bleak and unbearably plain hospital room. Instead, he'd much rather be somewhere else. Leaning back against the bed, he closed his eyes.

He wasn't at the cold hospital in the middle of winter, no. Instead, he was in a flower field; the sun shining down on him in the endless brightness. It was Midsummer. He was back in Sweden, sitting off to the side of the festivities as he twisted the stems of the flowers to create a beautiful crown. The sunbeams were warm against his skin, and there were soft fluffy clouds that scattered the bright blue sky. He grasped the crown in his hands, cradling it as he passed it to the person next to him, who gave him a flower crown of his own. He held the new crown in his hands, decorated with cute little white and blue flowers. They were delicately woven together in a way that Henrik wasn't sure he could mimic. He turned to face the person. It was Tino, smiling happily at him as he placed Henrik's flower crown on his head.



The beeping from the heart monitor rapidly increased.

His eyes snapped open, his face searing hot. What was Tino doing there? He hadn't even been trying to imagine him; he was just trying to think of things that made him happy. Henrik brought his arm to the side of the bed and shoved his glasses back on his face. Even when he brought himself back to Sweden, he couldn't separate himself from him. He breathed a lovelorn sigh. Tino made him feel like no one ever had. He was the only one he'd ever had feelings for.

He remembered those days, back in middle school, when Mathias would tease him for not 'liking' anyone. His old friend messed with him a lot back then, saying things to rile him up or hurt his feelings, anything to get a reaction out of him—preferably the swing of a fist. Mathias had always loved the thrill of a fight; they both had the scars to prove it. He pretended those words hadn't hurt him. That kind of love was something he'd never felt—something he thought he never would feel. But now, that was all different. Now, Mathias teased him for his inability to tell Tino his feelings for him. It was only worse this time, because Lukas was there to join in.

In a way, he supposed he preferred the fights. He usually won those.

Henrik felt a pang in his heart. He didn't want anyone else. He hadn't felt this way about a single other person before. The only person—the only person who he wanted to be with—was Tino.

Sweet, perfect, beautiful, Tino.

He shifted to his side in the bed, clutching a hand to his burning heart and fiddling with that bundle of ripped fabric. Of course, he wouldn't force Tino to be with him. If he didn't feel the same, that would be okay. He'd respect his wishes. Hell, maybe Tino wasn't even gay, and he was wasting his affections on someone who couldn't return his feelings. It tore at his heart, thinking of such a thing; a pain so deep that it shook his very core. But if Tino didn't want him, that would be something he'd respect, as much as it hurt him to do so.

The soft sound of footsteps filled the air, and there was a light rapping at the door.

“Ricky, is this your room, buddy?”

Mathias.

He didn't need to answer, as his friend threw open the door with gusto. Lukas and Emil shuffled inside, and then Mathias, followed shortly by that familiar straw blond hair...

His heart lurched. Tino had come to visit him; Tino cared enough to come see him. Well—of course he did—he was always so nice, it made sense that he would. He looked beautiful, even with the anxious look on his face.

Anxious? Why would he be anxious? It didn't make sense. He had nothing to worry about. Nothing bad had happened to him, right? Though Henrik couldn't be sure of that. Maybe something bad had happened while he was stuck here? He cursed himself. Why couldn't he have had the self-control to follow Tino's word? He wanted to leap out of that bed, to hug him tight and ask what was wrong and reassure him that everything would be okay. Instead, he bit the inside of his cheek, noting his disheveled hair, and the way his fingers fidgeted at his side and the way he clung to Mathias like he was the only lifeline he had. He was grateful that he had him there, able to comfort him when he could not.



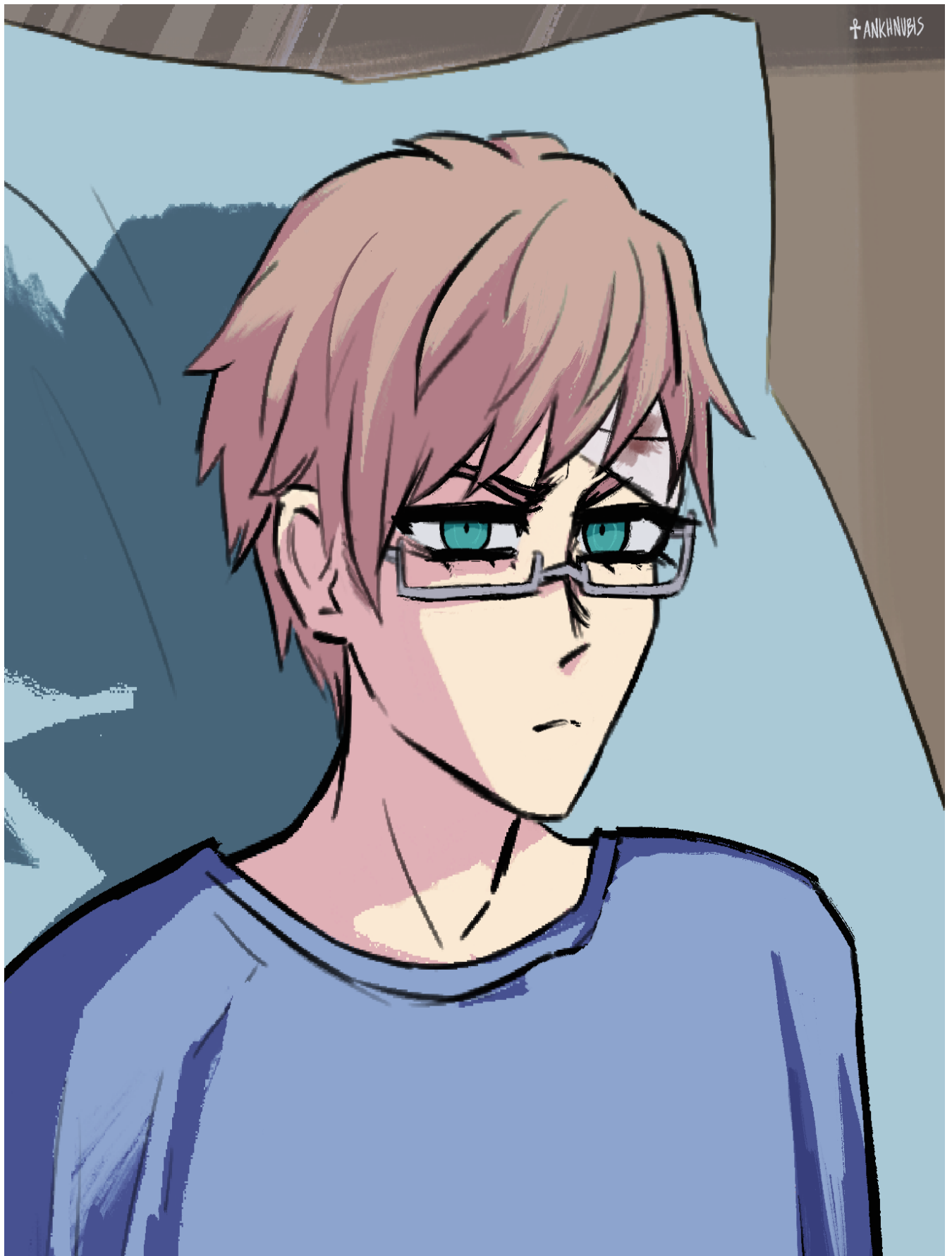
Or at least he was, until his eyes trailed up to see the impish, teasing grin that resided on his old friend's face. He winked, gesturing with his other hand at the man he had his arm wrapped around. Mathias' eyes glinted, as if to say, 'look who I've got', like Tino was some trophy—some prize to be won. Henrik felt his blood growing warmer in his veins, watching as he was taunted. The charming matador and the villainous beast.

Just like it had been all those years ago.

Of course, Mathias would do something like that. He loved to tease him, to make him upset until Henrik would grow so angry that he'd throw up his fists in retaliation. But that was all years behind them. Had Mathias missed the feeling? Of his face being pounded into the dirt, as Henrik was left to wonder why it always had to end up this way? He, at least in the eyes of the surrounding people, would always be seen as a violent monster, and Mathias as the charming knight, bathed in a revered and noble light Henrik could only wish to feel.

But it was one thing for Mathias to tease him; it was another to use the man he loved as a tool to get under Henrik's skin, especially when the man in question was only clinging to him to soothe his state of distress. He could take all the taunting Mathias threw at him, but Tino was not some prize to provoke Henrik in this childish game they both played.

He sat up in the bed and faced them, glaring maliciously at Mathias. Any words of greeting he would have had for him dying in his throat. He would extend no such courtesy to him, not when Mathias insisted on dragging Tino into their messy history. Not when he was so distraught.



But all was forgotten when he felt the tightness of an embrace. He looked down to see Tino's face buried in his chest, his arms wrapped around him and holding him tightly.

“You’re okay!” Tino practically shouted.

His heart roared to life.

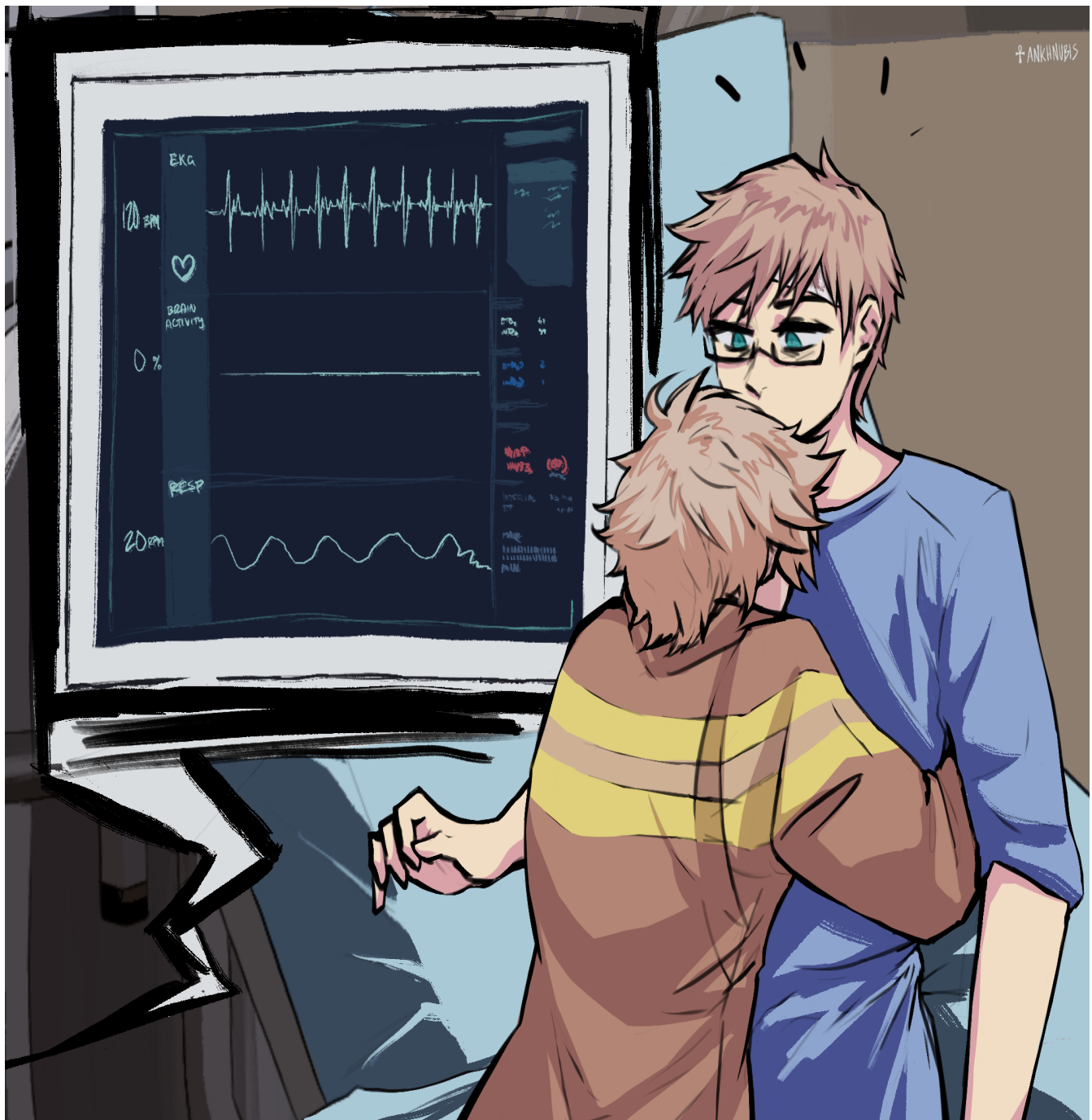
Tino wasn’t soft like he thought he’d be, rather, he was quite the opposite. Even through his thick jacket, he felt chiseled and muscular. His embrace was as cold as ice, and his skin was absolutely freezing. Henrik would’ve expected him to feel warmer, but that wasn’t something he would say out loud. Tino held onto him, squeezing him in such an unyielding manner that Henrik could hardly breathe. Not that he’d be able to breathe, anyway. Not when Tino was holding him like that. He couldn’t focus, he couldn’t say a word, sputtering out meaningless noises as he held his arms out, unable to bring himself to wrap his arms around Tino in return. He was too shocked.

“Um, Henrik, what’s that annoying beeping?” Emil asked.

The heartbeat monitor.

He cursed himself.

He hadn’t even noticed.



Tino pulled back, staring up at him with a confused look on his face. "... Are you okay?" He stepped back, removing his arms from Henrik and placing them at his sides.

"Um—Mm," Henrik stuttered.

He sounded like he had short-circuited.

When Tino stepped back, Mathias, Lukas, and Emil approached him, surrounding his hospital bed.

"You'll be out of here soon... right?" Emil asked, leaning over to look at him.

"Should be out tonight," he replied shortly.

Lukas breathed a soft sigh of relief. "You're an idiot, you know. What the hell were you thinking?"

But that was something everyone in the room already knew the answer to—well—everyone except for Tino.

Henrik put his head down in shame. “Sorry,” he mumbled, looking around the room as he delivered his apology.

“Ah, don’t worry about it, Ricky,” Mathias said, batting his hand. “Do you wanna come to Luke-y’s place after this? We’ve all been camping out there!”

“*Henrik*,” he corrected coldly.

“Yeah, yeah, whatever, Ricky,” Mathias said with a snicker.

What was he getting at? Was this a part of that game, too? He was being so friendly—using that stupid nickname like this was all some damn joke—like the thought of a fight hadn’t even crossed his mind. That prick had always insisted on pronouncing his name wrong. Ever since they were kids, anyway. Or, perhaps this was a part of the game—for Mathias to act friendly on the surface so that he’d look like the innocent party, and Henrik as the aggressor—just like it had been in all those years before.

But again, those thoughts were quieted as Tino squeezed his way through to the front of the group again. Henrik looked on at him, now visibly much calmer, as he ran a quick hand through his hair. He felt his cheeks grow hot, feeling warm under his gaze.

“Are you gonna come too, Tino?” Mathias continued.

Henrik clenched his teeth, once again letting that angered feeling wash over him. He didn’t know what to do or how to think. Was he messing with him? Was he trying to get him to fight? Or was it all in his head?

“I really shouldn’t stay another night,” Tino said with a slight frown. “My roommates might need me.” He didn’t clarify what he meant.

Perhaps, if Henrik hadn’t been so consumed by his thoughts of Mathias, he would’ve felt disappointed about that. Tino would’ve made staying over there worth it. Henrik knew he didn’t have a choice. He had nowhere else to go, nowhere but to the house he loathed to go to. Where Mathias might try to provoke him into having their first fistfight in years.

“Alright, alright, I won’t hassle you,” Mathias said with a cheerful smile.

Henrik gritted his teeth together, tightening his fists underneath the blankets as he defiantly stared up at him. He wouldn’t let Mathias use him like he was some pawn. They were older than they were back then, and he would defend himself however he needed to. The tense air in the room was filled by the quiet ringing of Tino’s phone, and Henrik jolted a little.

“Ah—that must be the dog shelter—hold on, I’ll be right back.” He quickly darted outside, saying nothing else as he slammed the door shut.

He was immediately hit by the lack of Tino’s presence. He didn’t know what he meant by that, but frankly, he didn’t care. All he could focus on was the dopey smile on Mathias’ face, blinking at him like he had no idea what had happened between them. Was he playing dumb? So Henrik would look like the bad guy in front of Lukas and Emil if he so much as raised a finger against his old friend?

“You sure you’re okay, buddy?” Mathias said with that stupid grin. “Is something bothering you? Why do you have that look on your face?” He jabbed his thumb behind him, pointing to the door. “Oh!” he exclaimed suddenly, as if in realization. “It’s because you didn’t expect your favorite person to come visit you!” He gave a snickering little laugh, not even noticing Lukas’ warning look, or Henrik’s narrowed eyes. “You have good taste, buddy!”

“Mathias,” hissed Lukas, obviously trying to get him to stop. Those eyes of stark navy watching over Henrik like he knew what was coming before it happened.

Mathias didn’t care. “He’s like, totally ripped too! I never took you for a muscle guy!” He laughed loudly.

Henrik violently swung his legs over the side of the bed, grabbing his old friend by the collar of his shirt. He wouldn’t take any more of this taunting. If he wanted a fight, he’d get it. Right here and right now. How dare he say such things about Tino and play innocent like that? He didn’t care that he was in nothing but a hospital gown. He’d take him down just like he always used to.

“Leave him out of this,” Henrik spat fiercely, tightening his grip and pulling him closer.



“Huh?!” Mathias exclaimed as he squirmed against Henrik’s hand. “What are you doing? Leave him out of what? Let me go!” He pushed himself away, taking a couple of steps back.

“You know,” Henrik snarled. Was he still playing dumb? Trying to make him look bad? He faltered, doubting himself for a moment as he met the eyes of Lukas and Emil, who were staring daggers down his back. Why *wouldn’t* Mathias play dumb? That way, he could look like the hero everyone always saw him as.

The man in front of him laughed, flashing his teeth in a smile which Henrik could only interpret to be like a canine baring its fangs. “I haven’t seen you make that face since high school.”

Henrik moved to step closer, but he was pushed back down onto the bed by Emil and Lukas.

“Watch it, you idiot,” Lukas snapped, “Or you’ll have more than that gash on your forehead to worry about.” His words were practically venomous, but said with such frigid apathy that he could feel the coldness through his touch.

“I’ve had worse,” Henrik muttered indignantly. He pushed the two brothers away from him and rose to his feet, towering above the others as he glared down at them.

Mathias hadn’t shifted in his stance, still blinking like the bumbling idiot he was. His eyes went wide with what was probably feigned confusion before he straightened, sticking his hand under his chin and leering at him.

“Oh!” he said, his voice still innocent and happy. “Is this about Tino?”

Henrik only had to glare to get his answer across.

Mathias scoffed, “Man, Ricky, you’ve really got it bad for him, huh?”

He straightened his back, giving his old friend a look of hatred. “Don’t talk about him like that.”

But Mathias blinked, loosening in his posture as he cocked his head. “What are you talking about?” he asked again. “I can’t make fun of you for having a crush on him anymore?”

Henrik’s blood was boiling in his veins, his teeth clenched so tightly that his jaw ached. “You know that’s not what this is about,” he snarled. “You wanted a fight, now you got one.”

“Woah, hey, I do not want to fight!” Mathias exclaimed. “I promise!” He stepped back, waving his hands in front of him in a signal of surrender. “You’re my best buddy!” Their gazes locked.

But it wasn’t like back then.

Those charming cobalt eyes against piercing sea-green.

He didn’t want to fight, because those years were long behind them.

“Oh.”

Oh no.

Henrik immediately deflated, slumping in his posture and falling back down to the hospital bed. Of course, he hadn’t wanted to fight. Why would he? They were much too old to be trading blows, and they had more than enough scars. They didn’t need any more. He put his head down.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“That’s right,” Lukas said sharply, jabbing his finger into his chest. His frigid stare was more than enough of a lecture, shaming him for daring to act so callously.

Henrik didn’t look up, ashamed of himself for being so brash.

“I’m sorry,” he said again, this time to Lukas.

Mathias laughed from the other side of the room, sauntering back over and coming to stand by his side. “That’s all right buddy, I forgive you. And I’m sorry for making you think I wanted to fight.”

“That’s okay,” Henrik muttered. He brought his legs back over into the hospital bed, settling back into it as he sighed, thoroughly convinced that he was the blundering idiot, rather than Mathias. At least Mathias was charming, and not some battle-hungry monster. He could only hope that Tino hadn’t

heard anything, and if he did, that he wouldn't think less of him. He really didn't like violence, if that sentiment could be believed from someone like him.

"So, Ricky," Mathias said, glancing at the door for a moment. "I bet you're wondering what happened after you passed out, yeah?"

He swallowed, his throat feeling dry as he looked up at his friend.

Emil laughed next to him, seeming to mock him for a reason Henrik didn't understand. "He has a video."

"A video?" Henrik repeated, his voice feeling dull and scratchy as he looked over at the three of them. Even Lukas was smiling, though it was more of a teasing smirk as they all met his eyes.

"Want to see it?" Mathias asked excitedly.

What could've happened in that recording?

"... Yes," Henrik answered shortly. He brought his hands together, knotting them tightly in his lap as he sat up.

Mathias pulled his phone out of his pocket. "Oh, you'll love this," he laughed.

Hesitantly, Henrik took the red device into his hands. It wasn't a long clip, leading Henrik to believe that Mathias had cropped the footage down significantly. The video started with a shot of the building before it jolted and the camera started shaking. Then, Tino, the little white dog he was holding, and Henrik stumbled out of it. The next few seconds were spent running over as he heard a loud thud—that must have been him falling. When the video refocused, it was on Mathias' knees as he kneeled, leaning over Henrik's fallen form. Henrik watched breathlessly as Tino brought his hands against his chest, giving him chest compressions before switching to mouth to mouth CPR.

"Oh," he muttered, his face burning red in embarrassment.

The heart beat monitor in the room beeped wildly. The video ended suddenly, remaining still for a couple of frames as Tino's lips remained on his.

Mathias took his phone back, laughing wickedly. "I did a little editing. Did you like it?"

Henrik couldn't answer, too flustered to even say anything as his heart pounded harder and harder against his chest.

Damn Mathias. Damn film majors. Damn his random decision to film something that in no way should have been filmed.

At Henrik's failure to answer, Mathias smiled. "Oh wow! You've really, really got it bad!"

Henrik took the heart monitor clamp off his finger, ending the beeping on the machine.

"Relax," Lukas said with a roll of his eyes, "It's not that bad."

"Yeah!" Mathias agreed enthusiastically. "I mean, you've already had your first kiss with him—or—dare I say, make-out session! And he instigated it!"

Henrik turned his face away from them, looking to the wall to hide his intense blush—though on anyone else, it would have appeared quite miniscule. It only lightly dusted his face, but to Henrik, it was probably one of the most emotive expressions he'd ever had.

"Shut up Mathias. I'll kick your ass."

"Yeah, yeah, go ahead." Mathias laughed quietly, sitting on the side of Henrik's bed next to him and wrapping his arm around his shoulder. "... I'm glad you're okay, man."

Henrik moved his head in, leaning against Mathias' shoulder with a sigh, his thoughts now filled with Tino and the recent development in the video.

"He was amazin'... How did he know how to do that?"

"He was a firefighter," Emil said dryly. "I thought that'd be obvious from the jacket he wears all the time."

Henrik sighed again as he closed his eyes.

Tino, who loved literature and wanted to teach elementary school children. Tino who could also perform CPR and was a trained firefighter. He was more and more interesting with each little thing he learned about him.

"He's... perfect," Henrik said breathlessly.

Mathias squeezed his shoulder. "So... are you gonna ask him out or what?"

Henrik felt a blazing feeling in his cheeks. He couldn't possibly—but he wanted to. God, did he want to.

"He told me just this morning that he's gay and looking for a relationship. This literally could not be any easier for you, Henrik. Just do it. Tino's nice. He'll say yes."

"He did?" Henrik asked, hardly believing what he was hearing.

"Yes," Lukas said with a roll of his eyes. "Now, remember the promise you made."

Right. That promise.

The promise that he'd have Tino's number by the end of the weekend.

His heart skipped in his chest. The weekend wasn't over—it had hardly even started—but Tino was going to go home. He wouldn't see him again until they went to their classes again on Monday. Well... unless he could make some other plan...

The door to the hospital room creaked open, and Tino slipped back inside, his eyes downcast slightly.

"The shelter said that she's going to be given back to her owner," he said a bit sadly. He looked like he had known that this would be the outcome—still, he seemed disappointed. Henrik's face fell into a steady frown. He didn't like seeing Tino sad, but he supposed there was nothing he could do.

"Aw, I'm sorry, buddy," Mathias said, removing his arm from Henrik's shoulder and going over to him. "You really liked that pup."

Tino shook his head as he joined the others. “It’s okay. I’m sure she’s happy to be going home.”

There was an indistinct murmur of agreement between Mathias, Lukas, and Emil.

“Anyway,” Tino said, swinging his arms a little at his sides, “Mathias, did you give Henrik the pancakes?”

Pancakes?

“Oh, no I didn’t!” Mathias said as he riffled through his pocket. “I completely forgot!” He produced a small tupperware container and pushed it into Henrik’s hands. “Tino made these for breakfast this morning; I thought you’d like to have some.”

Tino made them? If that was the case, he’d happily accept them.

“I hope you like them,” Tino chirped, “I spent all morning cooking.”

Tino was just... adorable. Henrik shook his head—Tino was also fully capable of picking him up and throwing him around. But... that was absolutely part of his charm; everything about him was a part of his charm.

“Um... thanks,” Henrik said shyly.

Tino came closer to him, wrapping him in a soft embrace again. “I’m really glad you’re okay,” he said into his shoulder.

This time, Henrik was a little more prepared as he brought his arms around Tino, too. “I—uh—I’m glad you’re okay too.”

It seemed like an arbitrary statement, with the knowledge of Tino’s training... but he didn’t remember much from last night. After such an impulsive action by the both of them, he was happy that they were both able to make it out of the building safely.

When Tino pulled away, his arms remained wrapped around him. He looked up at his face for a moment. Narrowing his eyes a little, he brought his hand up to Henrik’s forehead and brushed the hair away. Henrik recoiled in surprise, but almost immediately melted back into the touch.



“That looks like it’s going to scar,” Tino said with a disappointed frown.

“Uh—it’s okay,” Henrik stuttered. “Have lots of scars already.”

Tino said nothing in return, simply removing his hands and stepping back. If anyone else was reacting, Henrik couldn’t tell. His eyes solely focused on Tino as he pulled his phone out of his pocket and checked it.

“Alright,” he sighed, “My ride’s here. I’ll see you guys on Monday?”

The others nodded.

Tino couldn’t leave. He hadn’t asked him for his number yet. But Henrik was helpless to stop him as he turned to the door with a short wave. A million thoughts and impulses rushed through his head, but he couldn’t bring himself to move—much less to speak.

“Stay safe when I’m gone, okay?” he said with a gentle smile. But before Henrik could answer, he had already disappeared out the door, soft, slow steps echoing down the hallway.

Lukas put his hands on his hips and shook his head in disapproval, but Henrik paid him no mind, instead locking eyes with Mathias. He gave him an excited thumbs up and a radiant smile.

Well...here goes nothing.

“Wait, Tino!” Henrik cried out, praying to no one in particular that Tino wasn’t too far away to hear him. It shocked him when he wasn’t. It wasn’t the quiet steps of before—no—these footsteps were hard, like he was running.

Tino burst through the door. “Yes?” he asked.

He cursed himself.

He hadn’t thought this far ahead.

“Uh—” He was suddenly at a loss for words again. It was already hard enough for him to talk to him normally... How was he supposed to ask him something like this?

His lips parted slightly as he stared at Tino, his eyes not leaving him as he brought his hand to the table beside him. He fumbled around the surface for a moment.

“What’s up?” Tino asked, walking closer.

Finally, he found his phone. He clenched it in his hand, bringing it open to the contacts app and holding it out to Tino. He looked away, turning his head to the side in embarrassment, hoping to get the message across silently.

Tino turned a light pink. “Oh!” he said with lightness in his voice. “Do you want my phone number?” He didn’t wait for Henrik to answer before he snatched the phone from his hands. After typing on it for a few seconds, he shoved it back. “Here,” he mumbled, “text me when you get home...”

Without so much as a wave to the others in the room, he dashed outside, closing the door behind him. His quick footsteps echoed down the hallway.

Mathias let out a wild cheer, “Fuck yeah! You did it, Ricky!”

His joy was unfortunately contagious, as Henrik smiled as well. “... I did it,” he said breathlessly, almost unable to believe it himself. But when he looked down at his phone, he furrowed his eyebrows in confusion.

Next to Tino’s name was a single emoji.

The sign of the devil hand gesture?

Henrik adjusted his glasses and looked closer at his phone screen.

That was definitely what it was.

“Feeling proud of yourself?” Lukas asked as he examined his nails.

“He should be proud!” Mathias cheered. “Now he can ask him out on a little date!”

Henrik couldn't help it. Another tiny smile worked its way onto his lips as he pressed his phone tightly to his chest.

There was so much more to discover about Tino, and personally, he couldn't wait.

Emil's voice interrupted his thoughts abruptly. "You know that means you have to text him first, right?"

"...Fuck."

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes



“So,” Mathias said with a chortle, “have you texted him yet?” He leaned over the back of Lukas’ couch, eyeing Henrik’s phone.

“... No,” Henrik replied, shifting uncomfortably in his seat.

“You have to say something.” Lukas frowned, moving over to sit next to him. “You’ve been here for four hours now and all you’ve done is stare blankly at your phone.”

Okay, maybe that was a bit of an exaggeration.

Just a bit, though.

Henrik sighed and leaned over, resting his forearms on his knees as he looked to the floor. His phone sat in his hands, open to a new conversation with Tino.

It was blank. The caret—blinking idly in the empty chat box—seemed to taunt him mercilessly.

He had to wonder if it would have been this hard if Tino was the one with his number and not the other way around.

“What’s wrong with you?” Emil asked, walking over and sitting on the far side of the couch. “Can you not think of anything to say?”

Henrik simply nodded, not lifting his face up.

“Why don’t you talk about some of your interests?” Mathias said with a reassuring smile, walking up behind him. “Easy!”

“You think?” Henrik asked. He turned his head to look at Mathias, but didn’t move otherwise, his hands dangling idly off his legs.

“Absolutely not,” Lukas replied from next to him. “That’s rude. Texting him just to talk about yourself... unbelievable.” He crossed his arms in discontent. “You can’t do that.”

Henrik leaned back on the couch.

He could just not talk to Tino.

But he didn’t want that.

He wanted to talk to Tino more than anything. Because Tino was... everything.

But god, was he awful at conversation.

“Dunno what to say. Maybe I’ll text him tomorrow...”

Emil crossed his arms. “Didn’t he ask you to text him as soon as you got home? You’re going to give him a heart attack.” He frowned and pulled out his phone, reclining on the couch as he glanced at it. “There’s gotta be something.”

Henrik let his head rest in his hands.

Mathias groaned, “You’re so indecisive—when it comes to things like this, you’ve just gotta say the first thing that comes to your mind! That’s always worked for me!” He eyed the phone in Henrik’s hands. “You just gotta go for it!”

Lukas raised an eyebrow skeptically. “Are you sure about that?”

That couldn’t be right. Could it? Mathias was just being ridiculous again.

But... that attitude got him with Lukas... wasn’t it?

As crazy as it sounded, maybe there was a bit of truth in his sentiment.

Henrik squeezed the phone in his hands before letting his grip loosen. He looked down at it. Tino wouldn’t mind, right? He was so nice. He felt his heart speed up as his thumbs fell over the keypad, his breaths becoming shorter as the caret blinked in the text box.

Maybe something casual would do, something easy—something simple. Tino would probably like that.

Or maybe he’d like something longer... Henrik moved a hand to his cheek in thought.

“Okay, that’s it,” Mathias said.

Quick as a whip, he leaned over and plucked the phone from Henrik’s hands.

“You’ll never be able to text him without my help.”

No.

“You think too much for your own good! Don’t worry, man, your ol’ buddy’s got you covered!”

Henrik’s eyes widened in shock, looking down at his hands before realizing what Mathias was doing.

He jumped to his feet. “Give it back.”

He couldn’t let Mathias text Tino for him; not over his dead body. He would unquestionably mess everything up before it even started.

This was Mathias—stupid, but ultimately well-intentioned Mathias.

Mathias chuckled as Henrik’s phone pinged—whatever he had typed, he had sent. His heart sank with dread.

Holy shit.

“There you go, buddy! You can thank me later!” He sounded so excited—so thrilled. Henrik could feel the sweat forming on his forehead as a chilled feeling ran throughout his body. With a shaky hand, he took his phone back from Mathias.

He couldn’t have sent something too stupid? Right?

Please.

But no, Mathias had written what was probably the worst thing possible.

‘Hey Tino, this is Henrik! Wanna hear a joke? What music do minecraft players listen to? Bedrock and roll!!! Haha anyway, I just got home. How are you?’

Henrik could only stare in horror. The phone felt like a brick in his hands, and his breath grew heavy. Had that really happened? Had Mathias really sent that? He rubbed his eyes in desperation.

Nope. Still there.

Fuck.

His fingers tensed—his whole body tensed. He had really done that.

“Mathias!” he hissed. “What is wrong with you?!” His head was spinning and he felt dizzy from the adrenaline that was rushing through him. He pushed his glasses up on his face as he read the message over and over again.

But what was done was done.

“Cause you love minecraft, and I bet he does too! Everybody loves minecraft!”

Henrik ran his hand through his hair, nervously chewing on the inside of his lip. He crossed his arms and took a couple of steps. The direction wasn’t important, he just needed to do something. Any action would do. Just something to occupy and busy himself and keep his mind off of it. Anything that would stop him from marching right up to Mathias and strangling him.

“What did he send?” Lukas asked, his voice raised curiously as he stood. He put a hand on Henrik’s shoulder and glanced at the phone. “Oh my god,” he said with a grimace, “Mathias, you idiot.”

“Oh come on babe, it’s a perfect intro line!” Mathias smiled.

Emil looked up from his phone. “It couldn’t be that bad,” he said with a roll of his eyes. Lukas shook his head, his mouth curled in distaste.

“He made a Minecraft joke.”

Emil sat up straighter in his seat. “Mathias... you didn’t.”

“What?” Mathias asked. “It was a good line!”

“It can’t be a good line!” Emil argued back. “It’s from Minecraft!”

Henrik ran his hand through his hair again, his fingers subconsciously rubbing over the cut on his forehead. His throat felt dry, and his chest lurched. It wasn’t that bad, right? Tino would understand the reference... wouldn’t he?

Buzz.

Henrik could have thrown his phone across the room from how surprised he was. Bolts of dread shot through his body as he stared at the screen.

1 message from Tino.

“That was fast,” Lukas said, still peering over Henrik’s shoulder.

Henrik shook him off, going over to the couch and sitting back down.

Tino texted something back.

Tino actually texted something back.

He inhaled sharply, closing his eyes briefly before opening them again. The message, sitting there on his phone screen so innocently...

Did it have the potential to end whatever hopes he had of being with Tino?

Probably not.

Still though, even the thought of opening it sent a shiver down his spine. He straightened his posture against the couch.

Tino had responded quickly... hadn't he?

Could it be that... maybe... he had been waiting for him?

No, that would be absolutely ridiculous—a mindless fantasy even. There was no point in indulging in a thought like that.

“Oh my god,” Emil said with irritation, “just open it already.”

Henrik took another deep breath.

It was just a text message.

He opened it.

‘Sorry, I don’t really get the joke, but I’m glad you’re home okay!! I was really worried haha’

‘Sorry, I don’t really get the joke...’ Henrik deflated, letting the phone fall back down in his lap. His heart was pounding wildly in his chest, and the anxious chills he was getting radiated all the way to his fingertips as he read the text over and over again.

Mathias leaned over Henrik’s shoulder as he read the text. “What?! How does he not know about Minecraft?!” he asked in an alarmed voice.

If they were still in high school, Henrik probably would’ve punched him.

Lukas sat back down on the couch, leaning over slightly so he could read the text. Almost immediately, he leaned back again, a cringed expression on his face.

Emil finally got up, wordlessly holding his hand out in a gesture for Henrik to hand over his phone. He surrendered it to him, letting Emil read the exchange. “Oh, my god. Mathias, you idiot.” He handed the phone back and put his hands on his hips, staring very hard at him. “I can’t believe you. What are you, six years old?”

Mathias frowned, crossing his arms. “But it was such a good line! I bet Tino just doesn’t play video games or something, because that totally would’ve worked on Luke-y.”

Lukas curled his lip in distaste. “No, it wouldn’t.”

Henrik swallowed nervously, pulling at the collar of his shirt as he looked down at the screen again. Maybe there’s a way he could fix this.

Please, let there be a way that he could fix this.

He didn't consult his friends before typing, letting his thumbs hit the keys for a few seconds before sending off a text.

'It's from a game called Minecraft. Swedish. You would like it.'

The response was almost immediate.

'You think so? What's it about?'

Henrik's heart swelled. Tino was interested?

Mathias peeked over his shoulder again. "See! I told you! Everyone loves Minecraft!"

Henrik scoffed, blatantly deciding to ignore him.

'Sandbox game. You gather materials and build to survive. Eventually, you fight a dragon. Pretty peaceful most of the time, though.'

"What kind of summary is that?" Lukas asked, looking over Henrik's shoulder again.

"I'm tryin' my best," Henrik protested, shifting over slightly to hide his phone screen.

It buzzed again.

'Can you blow shit up?'

Henrik sat up, adjusting his glasses as he reread the text, his eyebrow raised in a somewhat perplexed expression.

That didn't seem like the Tino he knew at all...

Then again, he really didn't know him that well...

Tino who loved to read classic literature, Tino who wanted to teach elementary school children, Tino who was a trained firefighter and... Tino who liked to blow things up... apparently.

He could roll with that.

'Yes. There is TNT and you can blow things up for materials. Or for fun. There is also a monster that blows itself up if it gets too close to you.'

"Henrik, please stop telling him about minecraft," Emil begged, shaking his head as he read over their conversation.

Henrik readjusted again, pulling his phone closer to him as Tino sent another response.

'Really? That's so badass!! It sounds like so much fun.'

'...Badass?'

Tino really was a bit strange. But Henrik didn't mind.

No, he didn't mind at all.

'It's a lot of fun. One of my favorite games.'

Mathias leaned over Henrik's shoulder again, reading the conversation.

"You know how to pick 'em huh, Ricky?" he laughed.

Henrik's face heated, but turned his head to the side to hide it. "Shut up," he said through his teeth.

'I've never been the biggest video game person, but I'll definitely check it out!'

"Oh wow," Lukas said, "that actually sold him."

"Maybe he's got an ulterior motive," Mathias suggested with a smirk, nudging Henrik's shoulder. His blush grew slightly pinker on his cheeks.

"Please stop talking about minecraft," Emil said with a shake of his head. "Please."

Henrik brought his phone back up and typed on it.

'You should. It is very fun.'



With every text he received, he was learning more and more about Tino's personality. It was amazing.

He was amazing.

'Maybe we could play it together sometime? You could show me the ropes?'

Henrik's heart practically stopped, his head pounding against his skull.

Was Tino inviting him to hang out sometime?

His face flushed deeper than it ever had before, covering the edges of his face in a light pink.

"Woah! Dude! Did he just ask you out? Nice!" Mathias cheered, shaking his shoulder proudly.

"Wait what?" Emil demanded. "He did not."

“Oh yes, he did,” Mathias said excitedly.

“Over Minecraft?” His voice was high in complete disbelief. “Are you serious?”

“Unfortunately,” Lukas said.

“Oh my god.” Emil pinched the bridge of his nose. “You actually did it.”

Henrik brought his attention back to his phone, his mouth feeling dry as he typed in nervous anticipation.

‘I’d like that.’

Tino’s response was quick.

‘What are you up to right now?’

Henrik looked around briefly before returning his attention to his phone.

‘With Mathias, Lukas, and Emil. Having a ‘out of hospital’ party, as Mathias called it.’

Tino’s new message came even faster than the one previous.

‘That sounds like so much fun! I wish I could be doing something like that, my roommates are all asleep from drinking too much haha.’

Tino had said that he and his roommates were heavy drinkers, so that wasn’t too surprising. Still, it was strange to think about. Sweet, delicate, little Tino being able to shoot round upon round of shots. It was almost impossible for him to picture.

“Wait,” Mathias said, reaching over to snatch Henrik’s phone. “He’s got alcohol?!”

But Henrik wouldn’t let Mathias take it from him so easily this time. He shoved his arm out of the way, blocking him.

“Aw come on Ricky! We gotta ask him to bring some!” Mathias whined.

“No,” Henrik said firmly.

“Really?” Emil asked. “You don’t want him to come over? That’s surprising.” His words were sharp and laced with sarcasm.

... Tino coming over? His blush grew darker.

“Well—uh,” Henrik sputtered.

Mathias took advantage of Henrik’s sudden blubbering; he launched over the couch, kicking his friend’s arm and snatching the phone from his hand. “Ha!” he declared triumphantly. “Got it!”

The color drained from Henrik’s face, and an intense feeling of panic washed over him. He couldn’t let Mathias contact Tino again. He wouldn’t allow it. He was doing just fine on his own! He didn’t need his friends’ help. His heart stuttered in his chest as he reached over—grabbing desperately at Mathias’ arm as he held it just out of reach, laughing maniacally as he did so.

“Come on! Let’s invite him over. It’ll be fun!”

“No,” Henrik said again, “not doin’ that.” He pulled Mathias’ arm and yanked him down. Mathias yelped a little at the tugging of his limb. One of his eyes screwed shut as he landed against the back of the couch. Henrik jolted at the sound and released him.

He hadn’t meant to hurt him.

“Calm down, both of you,” Lukas said, his voice raised slightly in warning.

“You okay?” he asked, concern in his voice as he watched Mathias rub his shoulder, the phone dangling weakly in his hand as he looked to the floor.

“Yeah, I’m alright,” he responded, raising his head.

Was... he smiling?

“And I think you’ll be alright too.” He threw his hand off his shoulder. He wasn’t hurt at all, and a wicked grin traced his lips. “Right after Tino comes over!” He tossed the phone through the air, leaving Henrik to clumsily fumble a catch as it landed in his lap.

The phone was ringing.

Henrik cursed himself again.

Mathias had called Tino.

And then he’d thrown him the phone to answer it.

“Mathias,” Henrik hissed in panic, but any other words he had for him were forgotten as the ringing stopped. A different toned sound played as the lines connected.

“Hello?” Tino’s voice came through the phone.

Though his voice was raised in question, it came off in a bit of a sing-song tune. And all of Henrik’s thoughts melted away at the sound of it. Even through the phone’s distortion, he sounded wonderful. He clutched the phone in his hands tightly, struggling to come up with something to say.

“...Henrik?”

Lukas shook his head in disapproval.

“Say something,” Emil whispered urgently, his voice sharp.

“Er—” Henrik stuttered again.

“Oh my god,” Mathias complained under his breath, “I really have to do everything, don’t I?” He walked around the couch, nonchalantly sitting next to Henrik as he raised his voice so Tino could hear him. “Hey Tino!”

There was a slight pause before he responded.

“... Mathias? Is that you?”

“Sure is!” he chirped, “Do you wanna come over? You should bring that booze you were talking about! You know, to celebrate ol’ Ricky getting home from the hospital!”

Tino paused for a moment again, as if he were contemplating for a few quick seconds before he answered. "You know what? Why not? Everyone else is already asleep, so... Sure! I'd love to. I really could still use that party we were supposed to have; It's been a dry night for me." He chuckled to himself.

God, his laugh was cute. Henrik wanted to hear it over and over again, the sound ringing in his ears as a soft smile traced his lips.

He knew he was far gone, but... he couldn't help it.

He was just... smitten. Completely and utterly smitten with Tino.

"Henrik'll text you the address, okay?" Mathias said.

"Yup," Tino hummed, "I'll bring my bike, so I'll be over in just a minute. See you soon!"

The phone clicked, and their call was disconnected.

...His bike?

Was he going to show up on an actual bicycle?

Henrik felt his face growing warmer. Sure, there were things that were a bit strange about him, but that didn't matter. Tino was perfect in every way. A small smile tugged at his lips as he looked down at the phone in his lap. After sending Tino the address, he moved his hand to his chest, clutching at the spot of his aching heart.

"Are you serious?" Emil asked, his gaze flickering over Henrik before it went over to Lukas and Mathias. "Is this really what you've been dealing with for the past year and a half?" His voice was snarky and cold.

"Unfortunately," Lukas said.

Henrik didn't even bother with protesting. What could he say? It was true.

"Aw, hey, cut the man some slack! At least he's doing something about it now! Who knows, maybe you'll have a new boyfriend by the end of the night!" Mathias said, teasingly wrapping his arm around Henrik's shoulder and shaking him a little. "Doesn't that sound nice?"

Henrik said nothing, the blush on his face already telling the others exactly how he felt about the matter.

Tino, being his boyfriend. The two of them being together. Tino, holding his hand softly as they studied together. Would it be like what Mathias and Lukas had? He had to wonder. Would he and Tino move in together? Sleep in the same bed, maybe? His smile grew slightly wider. He'd love to wake up to the sight of Tino every morning.

Sweet, beautiful, perfect Tino.

Tino, who he would kiss goodnight, and hold under the covers as they slept. Tino who he'd make breakfast for every morning. Tino who would smile and tell him he loved him. He felt his eyes crinkling a little in contentment at the thought.

Tino telling him he loved him.

“Now look at that. When was the last time he smiled that big?” Mathias asked.

“The first time he sold something on his Etsy shop?” Emil suggested, “You know—that big swan carving he made?”

“I think it was when he finished that 25,000 piece puzzle—the one that took him a billion years to finish.” Lukas said.

“No way,” Mathias said. “This is bigger than those.”

Was he really smiling that much?

Henrik brought his hand to his lips and faintly traced the outline.

On another person, it would have been tiny. The smile hardly reached his eyes, and his cheeks were barely moved by it, and yet, it was probably the biggest smile he’d had in years.

Tino really brought out the best in him, even when he wasn’t around.

“You really love him, huh?” Mathias said.

“Mm,” Henrik replied, moving his hand back down to rest in his lap.

“Man, it’s just like that song you like! You know the one!” Mathias nudged Henrik in the shoulder.

“Please don’t,” Henrik said flatly.

But Mathias was pretending not to hear him. As he leapt up from the couch, he burst into song.

“Waterloo - jag är besegrad, nu ger jag mig! Waterloo - lova mej nöjet att älska dig!”

His pronunciation of the words... left a lot to be desired. Emil scoffed from across the room, shaking his head before once again burying his eyes in his phone. Lukas let out a short, raspy laugh before quickly covering his mouth and hiding it.

Henrik grimaced in distaste. “Your Swedish is terrible.”

“So is your accent,” Mathias laughed.

Henrik furrowed his eyebrows, but didn’t argue with him.

“So why don’t you show us how it’s done? Sing it for us!” Mathias said excitedly.

Henrik’s frown grew deeper. “I don’t sing,” he said.

It wasn’t that he didn’t want to sing because his voice was something he was embarrassed of, rather, his voice was just deep. It had been that way ever since he was young, and it was completely unsuitable for the type of music he liked. His voice was just too low for the upbeat and happy ABBA chords.

Well, that and how embarrassing it was that he knew all the words.

And not to mention how humiliating it would be to actually sing in front of his friends.

“Not even one line?” Lukas teased, that rare sliver of a smile still sitting on his lips. Lukas only ever seemed to smile at him when he was making fun of him.

“No,” Henrik said.

“Aw, come on, please?” Mathias begged, grabbing onto his shoulder and shaking him a little.

“No.”

“I don’t know why you bother,” Emil sighed from the couch, “that’s never worked before.”

“It was worth a shot at least,” Mathias said. Lukas rolled his eyes and got up from his seat, putting his hand on Mathias’ shoulder.

“Okay, enough messing around,” he said. “Can you help me clean up a bit before Tino gets here? I’d rather him not think we’re a bunch of slob.”

Mathias nodded and put his hand to his forehead in a little salute. “You got it!”

The two of them walked off, heading towards the guest bedroom.

Emil watched as his brother and Mathias left, staring until they were far beyond what he could’ve seen. Quietly, he stood up from his seat and moved to sit down next to Henrik; it was almost as if it was something he had been waiting to do. He came close, letting his head rest on the side of his shoulder as he loosely held his phone in his lap. He hadn’t even spared a glance at it.



Henrik looked down at him for a moment. It wasn't unusual for Emil to be this way, but it still surprised him that he seemed to shift his mood so quickly. Still, he wouldn't ask for him to change.

He gently wrapped his arm around Emil and softly rubbed his skin.

“You okay?” he asked.

“Yeah,” Emil replied, “I just have... some stuff on my mind.”

Henrik’s eyes softened, and he held him a bit closer.

“Do you wanna talk about it?”

“Yeah...” Emil said quietly, moving closer to him. He closed his eyes and let out a quiet sigh before his gaze met Henrik’s again. “... And you know I can’t tell Lukas about it, He’s too overbearing, and Mathias is... *Mathias*.”

“So that leaves me,” Henrik said.

“Don’t say it like that.” Emil shifted against him, looking into his eyes. “You’re a good listener. So... that’s why I wanted to ask for your help.”

“Mm.”

Emil hesitated for a bit before he spoke, his cheeks flushed slightly in embarrassment. “How do you know when you’re in love?”

Oh.

It was going to be this kind of advice.

But if anyone could answer that question for him, it would be Henrik.

Well... it would be if he could find the words.

Being in love felt... like a song—like a dance. Something that was tender and soft one moment and passionate the next. It was burning, like a fire that crept up from the heart and tore at the soul. Love was like traveling down river rapids without a map, dangerous and confusing but... thrilling. It was like going on a high-speed roller coaster, with daring twists and turns that left nothing but the feeling of rushing blood and a pounding heart. Love was everything. It was the smell of sweet flowers and the roaring of a waterfall. He could hardly believe he had lived without that feeling for so long.

To be alive was to be in love, at least when he was with Tino.

“It’s when your heart beats fast,” Henrik said.

“Oh,” Emil said. He placed his hand over his heart, looking down at it briefly before locking eyes with Henrik again.

There was a bit of silence for a moment, and Emil relaxed against him, turning his face away and facing the walls.

Henrik wanted to ask what was going through his mind, but he didn’t have to, as Emil spoke again.

“I think... I think I’m falling in love with someone,” he said. “And I’m not sure what to feel.” He didn’t remove his eyes from the wall. “Is it okay to fall in love with someone... someone that you’ve never met in person before?”

Henrik narrowed his eyes slightly, but Emil didn't see. "He's from Hong Kong, his name's Leon, and he's just—so cool... He thinks it's funny that I'm older than him, even though he's apparently taller than me. He's an amazing artist too, and he can skateboard super well. His Cantonese name is super cool too, even though he thinks it's embarrassing and old-fashioned."

Henrik didn't even have to ask as Emil softly sighed, letting the name roll off his tongue with a surprisingly good accent. Had he been practicing?

"Lee Siu Chun," he said, a smile faintly tracing his lips.

Even though Emil seemed happy, Henrik couldn't help but feel protective of him.

"Ever seen his face before?" he asked.

Emil nodded. "Yeah, we video chat all the time. He's definitely who he says he is." He let out another lovelorn sigh. "Definitely."

Henrik allowed his eyes to soften a bit as he looked down at Emil. He was going to be as far gone as himself if this kept up.

"I like his hair," Emil said again, "and his golden brown eyes, and his cool fashion sense... I thought he'd think I was lame, but he said that he liked my lopapeysur... he asked me to make one for him." A faint blush was visible on his face.

Henrik sighed internally. It worried him a little that Emil was falling for someone all the way around the world, but who was he to get in the way of their love? Not when he couldn't profess his own feelings for someone that was—in comparison—just a couple of streets away.

"If you love him, tell him," Henrik said.

"You think so?" Emil asked.

"Mm."

Emil cleared his throat and sat up, getting off of Henrik and sitting upright on the couch.

"Maybe I'll tell him one day..."

"Good plan," he said.

It was quiet for a moment—the only sound being a low buzzing that came from outside—as Emil slunk back to his original position on the couch, so it was like he had never opened up to Henrik at all. He was a reserved kid, so it made sense to him that he wouldn't want Mathias or Lukas to know about it. Those two in particular might be upset that Emil asked for his advice rather than theirs, saying that he was probably the worst person he could ask for help. Especially if it was about love. Henrik could only pray to whatever gods rested above him that they wouldn't find out. He'd very much like to avoid being teased by his two friends.

The buzzing was growing louder.

What could it be? Henrik couldn't help but wonder. He hadn't really heard anything like it. Well, at least he thought he hadn't.

A loud rev ripped through the air.

Mathias practically sprinted into view, pushing his face against the glass of the window as he stared into the blackness outside. His smile was incredibly large as he bounced on his toes, laughing softly to himself.

“Come here Ricky, you’ll love this.”

Henrik wouldn’t be one to argue, not this time. He stepped quickly, large strides practically slamming against the wood floors as he tried to contain his anticipation. He had almost made it to the window when a soft knocking was heard at the door. Henrik felt the blood shoot through his veins in a spike of anxiety. Was Tino here already?

Mathias pushed him towards the door. “Open it!” he urged.

He swallowed, his throat feeling dry as his shaky hand landed on the doorknob.

He could do it—he was just saying ‘hello’. He’d done this before. It would be easy.

His heart pounding, he pulled open the front door.

But the person who greeted him wasn’t Tino—it couldn’t have been.

This person was clothed head to toe in black leather, with a white T-shirt that hugged his body—the outline of his muscles showing slightly under the fabric. On his back sat a sleek and dark-colored backpack, and his palms were covered by fingerless gloves. His combat boots were tightly double knotted, and the jacket he wore was covered in small silver spikes that jutted out sharply from his shoulders. But that wasn’t the strangest thing this person was wearing, no, far from it. The strangest thing was the helmet he wore on his head. It, too, was black, but it had two little horns that poked out, like a devil’s. The stranger’s eyes were covered by the headgear’s dark visor. He would have looked very intimidating if not for his shorter stature.

Who was this person, and why had he come here? Henrik couldn’t help but stiffen his posture, narrowing his eyes at whoever was underneath that helmet.

But the stranger wasn’t intimidated. In fact, he waved jovially, and moved his hand to lift the protective shade that covered his face.

Henrik’s heart nearly stopped as familiar lilac eyes met his own.

It was Tino.



✚ ANKHNUBIS

His eyes crinkled upward in what was revealed to be a bright smile as he pulled his helmet off. “Long time no see,” he said with a little laugh, his hair blowing softly in the wind.

Oh god.

Henrik's heart roared to life as he locked eyes with him. His face felt like it was burning and his heart pounded in his chest. He couldn't bring his eyes away from him, studying that familiar face. Any breath that he had within him was lost as he stood at the door.

Tino looked... absolutely stunning. He hadn't thought he could look any more attractive.

"I hope I wasn't too late," Tino said. "There was a bit of traffic." He laughed again with an awkward sort of teeter as he moved to balance the helmet on his hip.

Traffic?

Henrik tore his eyes from the man in front of him to look into the driveway.

Of course, it wasn't a bicycle that sat there.

It was an actual motorcycle.

Tino's motorcycle.

... He really was perfect, wasn't he?

Tino looked up at him, scratching the back of his neck. "Um, Henrik," he laughed uncomfortably. "Hello?"

He cursed himself. He had been so busy staring; he had forgotten that Tino was actually standing in front of him.

"Uh—" Henrik stuttered, "Hello," he felt the warmth creeping up on his face and he stepped aside, allowing Tino into the house. His thoughts were screaming—hardly coherent as Tino walked past him. He smelled like roasted chestnuts and gingerbread, and it was almost like he was the embodiment of winter itself. He wanted to say something—anything—to the man that stood in front of him.

He just had to.

"Tino—uh—" He turned to face him, lilac eyes meeting his own.

"Yes?" he asked.

"I—er—" he stuttered again. "I like your bike."

"Oh really? Thanks!" Tino smiled, his awkwardness now forgotten. "I was lucky, bought her second hand, so I got it super cheap, but you wouldn't know it from the way she runs." He brought his hand to his lips and laughed.

Henrik's face felt like it was on fire. His chest was tight as he gazed down at Tino. His laugh echoed in his ears as he pressed his hands together, attempting to hide how sweaty his palms were becoming.

Tino was good at making him into a complete wreck.

But he wouldn't have to worry about that for long, as Mathias and Lukas soon came to greet him at the door. He waved happily, pulling at the sides of his jacket as he slipped it off. Henrik swallowed

hard in his mouth, unable to tear his eyes away from the newly revealed skin. Tino really was ripped, with a lean physique reminiscent of a warrior's. He couldn't help but stare at the large muscles that sat there as he felt a bead of sweat forming on his forehead. He quickly wiped it away with the back of his hand.

Mathias and Lukas came to stand next to him, greeting Tino at the door. They walked together with their pinkies loosely intertwined and their steps fell even with each other against the floor. The little smirk that Lukas gave him didn't escape Henrik's notice as they locked eyes with each other.

Henrik twisted his face to the side, not wanting to witness Lukas' subtle teasing.

"Tino!" Mathias said with a radiant smile. He greeted him with a quick hug and a pat on the back. "Love your new outfit. It really shows off your pipes!"

Tino laughed awkwardly again. "Um—sorry, my what? You mean the pipes on my motorcycle?" He looked like he knew what he said didn't make sense, but it seemed that he didn't understand the slang.

"No, no, your pipes!" Mathias exclaimed, flexing one of his arms. "Your muscles!"

Tino turned a bright red, and he took a step back. "Oh—uh—no," he said, "Your clothes need to be tight when you're riding a motorcycle is all, it's more, uh..." he hesitated for a moment, like he was trying to come up with the word. He muttered in what sounded like Finnish under his breath for a moment before speaking again. "Aerodynamic." He didn't pronounce it right. It seemed that Tino still sometimes struggled with his English, which wasn't at all surprising to Henrik. They all knew how difficult of a language it was to learn, especially when you were on your own.

Tino turned back to face the rest of the group. "Tight clothes are more aerodynamic, and help you go faster, while loose clothes catch in the wind and slow you down," he explained.

Mathias nodded a little. "Oh, I see," he said in understanding. "I was never much good at physics, but that actually makes sense! Thanks bud!"

Lukas shook his head, pushing Mathias out of the way.

"Welcome back," he said. "Mathias and I cleaned up the guest room for you, so you can sleep in there for tonight."

Tino nodded, and put a hand on the strap of his backpack, adjusting it as the light clinking was heard from inside. From just the sound alone, it was clear that he had squeezed quite a few bottles in there.

"Woah, Tino," Mathias said, draping his arms over Lukas' shoulders and putting his chin on the top of his head. "How much did you bring?"

"You'll see," he said.

Lukas shrugged a little, probably figuring that it wouldn't be that important. He put his hand on top of Mathias' and led them all into the living room. Emil was still sitting on the couch, chewing on the inside of his lip as he looked at his phone, but he quickly stuffed it in his pocket when he saw Tino had arrived.

Tino waved to him briefly before settling down in front of the coffee table. He slipped off his backpack and unzipped it, his hands disappearing inside it for a quick moment. Henrik and Mathias went over to sit on the couch while Lukas hovered over the back of it, their eyes all intently focused on Tino as he pulled out large bottles of alcohol from his bag.

Tino really was a heavy drinker.

There were bottles of akvavit, vodka, and two other types that he didn't quite recognize. Upon further inspection of their labels, they turned out to be bottles of midus and vana tallinn. Tino placed the bottles on the table and eyed the other people around him.

Lukas silently went off to the kitchen, probably to fetch shot glasses for the four of them.

“Woah, Tino!” Mathias said with wide eyes. “When you said you had alcohol, you really meant it, huh?”

Tino simply shrugged, reaching into his backpack again and pulling out his phone.

His phone... that had two large cracks in the screen.

Had it always been like that?

“What happened to your phone?” Henrik asked.

Tino immediately pushed the device's screen to his chest, hiding the points of breakage.

“Oh! Nothing!” he said far too quickly. “Dropped it.” His face was a bit red.

“Again? Didn't you only have one crack yesterday?” Mathias questioned, leaning in on him a bit as he posed his head so he could get a better look at it.

“Yeah,” his teetering laughter returned as he scratched the back of his neck in an awkward resolve. “I'm a bit clumsy, is all.”

Henrik furrowed his eyebrows. That didn't seem to be true at all. If Tino was actually clumsy, then he wouldn't have been able to scale his apartment building in such a quick time—not to mention the other skillful techniques he had used that night. Henrik felt his face heat again. He turned his face to the side and cleared his throat.

He didn't have time to contemplate further, as Lukas once again arrived, placing a shot glass in front of his spot at the coffee table with a hard slam. The other glasses were promptly passed around to the other people in the room.

Emil watched intently. “Lukas can I—”

“No,” came his immediate response.

Emil huffed and reclined back on the couch as he took his eyes off the alcohol. It wasn't long before his face was buried in his phone again, his fingers pressing aggressively on the keys.

“Alright!” Tino exclaimed. He popped open the bottle of vodka and poured everyone a round before bringing his own glass up into the air. “Who's ready to party?!”

A rounding cheer went through the room as they raised their glasses and drank from them.

“Who's turn—” Mathias hiccupped, “Who's turn is it to ask now?” Surprisingly, he had terrible alcohol tolerance.

“Mine,” Tino said, glancing around the room briefly. He held the bottle of liquor in his hand, the remaining liquid sloshing around inside. His legs were crossed as he leaned over the side of the coffee table, his face flushed from the alcohol.

He felt a bit dizzy as he brought his eyes to look over the other people around him. Mathias was leaning on Lukas, his arms draped over him loosely as he pressed sloppy kisses to his cheek. Lukas, on the other hand, looked mostly unaffected. Emil still sat on the far side of the couch, having decided to stay and play their drinking game with them—well, to play without the drinking part, that is. He wasn’t really paying attention to what was happening around him though, as he was sipping on a glass of water as he looked at his phone. Finally, his eyes landed on Henrik, who looked oddly relaxed as he reclined fully against the couch. His eyes were closed lightly, and the ghost of a blush danced across his cheeks.

Tino thought he’d never see him without that hardened look on his face. He was usually so stern. Not that Tino minded, of course, but it was... nice seeing him with such an easy-going expression.

“Mathias,” Tino began, looking at him out of the corner of his eyes, “Ever done anything illegal?”

He laughed a drunken chortle as he pulled himself off of Lukas. “Man...” he said as he leaned back. “There was that one time, when we—” he hiccuped again. “—when me and Lukas and Henrik went out to have a little—makeshift russ celebration. Cause he—moved away from Norway—before he could—have one. And we—got a tour bus and we—”

Lukas stopped him, putting a hand to his lips and handing him a filled glass. “You aren’t finishing that story,” he said.

A faint smile pressed to Henrik’s lips as he watched Mathias drink.

“Good time,” he said.

“A good time that those two don’t need to know about,” Lukas said with crossed arms, eying Tino and Emil.

There was a bit of disappointment that welled up in his chest after hearing that answer. He felt a little excluded—though he knew he shouldn’t. They’d all been friends for much longer than him, so it was only natural that some things stay buried. Still, his heart felt a bit pained.

“You’re no fun,” Tino said, a small lighthearted laugh escaping him.

As it was now Mathias’s turn, he readjusted on the couch, facing Henrik to ask him a question.

“Hey Ricky,” he pestered, shaking his shoulder a little. “What was your first—kiss like?” Lukas elbowed his boyfriend slightly, perhaps annoyed he had chosen such a question.

To Tino’s surprise, he completely stiffened, that relaxed look from before completely leaving him as he poured himself a shot and drank it. He was tense until he slid the glass back down on the table, eyeing the people around him as if he was looking to see their reactions to his response to the question.

Tino laughed again, but this time his cheeks warmed slightly.

Despite first impressions, Henrik was really cute. He was probably just embarrassed about it and wouldn’t want to share, or... maybe he’d never had his first kiss at all. Tino squirmed with excitement.

He'd happily bestow upon him that honor if he got the chance... Or maybe that was something he'd already done...

"Lukas, worst part of dating Mathias?" Henrik asked when he had regained control of his composure.

"Hm," Lukas hummed, gently pushing Mathias off him as he was trying to kiss him again. "Too touchy sometimes."

"Too—touchy?" Mathias repeated sadly.

Lukas patted his boyfriend's head, running his hand through his hair, which was steadily falling from its usual upright style. He leaned into the touch, and a cheerful smile returned to his face. They were kind of strange, but Tino supposed that understanding each other like that came hand in hand with knowing someone so deeply. That was something he'd never had.

He let his eyes trail up to Henrik, whose inebriated slight smile sent a wave of heat through his cold body.

This time would be different.

When Lukas was done massaging Mathias' head, he turned to his little brother. "Who were you texting on the way to the hospital?" he asked.

Emil gave him a hard frown. "I text a lot of people. I don't know what you're talking about."

"Yeah right," Lukas said with a roll of his eyes, "You know exactly who I mean. You never get that happy just texting anyone."

Emil met Lukas' gaze, their eyes locking fiercely. Tino shifted uncomfortably in his seat on the floor, the tension in the room filling the air like a thick cloud. The pair of brothers stared each other down, neither one wanting to be the one to cave. Lukas ground his teeth together, and Emil narrowed his eyes darkly.

"Whatever." Emil crossed his arms and leaned back. "It's not a big deal. Just an online friend. We've been talking for a couple of months. He's funny, that's all."

Lukas gave a smirk of triumph. "What's his name?"

Emil's frown deepened. "None of your business." He didn't hesitate as he directed his attention to the other side of the room to ask his question—probably wanting Lukas' attention off him. "Henrik, show us your internet search history."

Henrik stiffened again as Mathias hiccuped with a joyful cheer. "Yeah! Henrik—you gotta show us!"

"No," he said, the flush on his face growing much worse. He filled his glass with another shot and downed it.

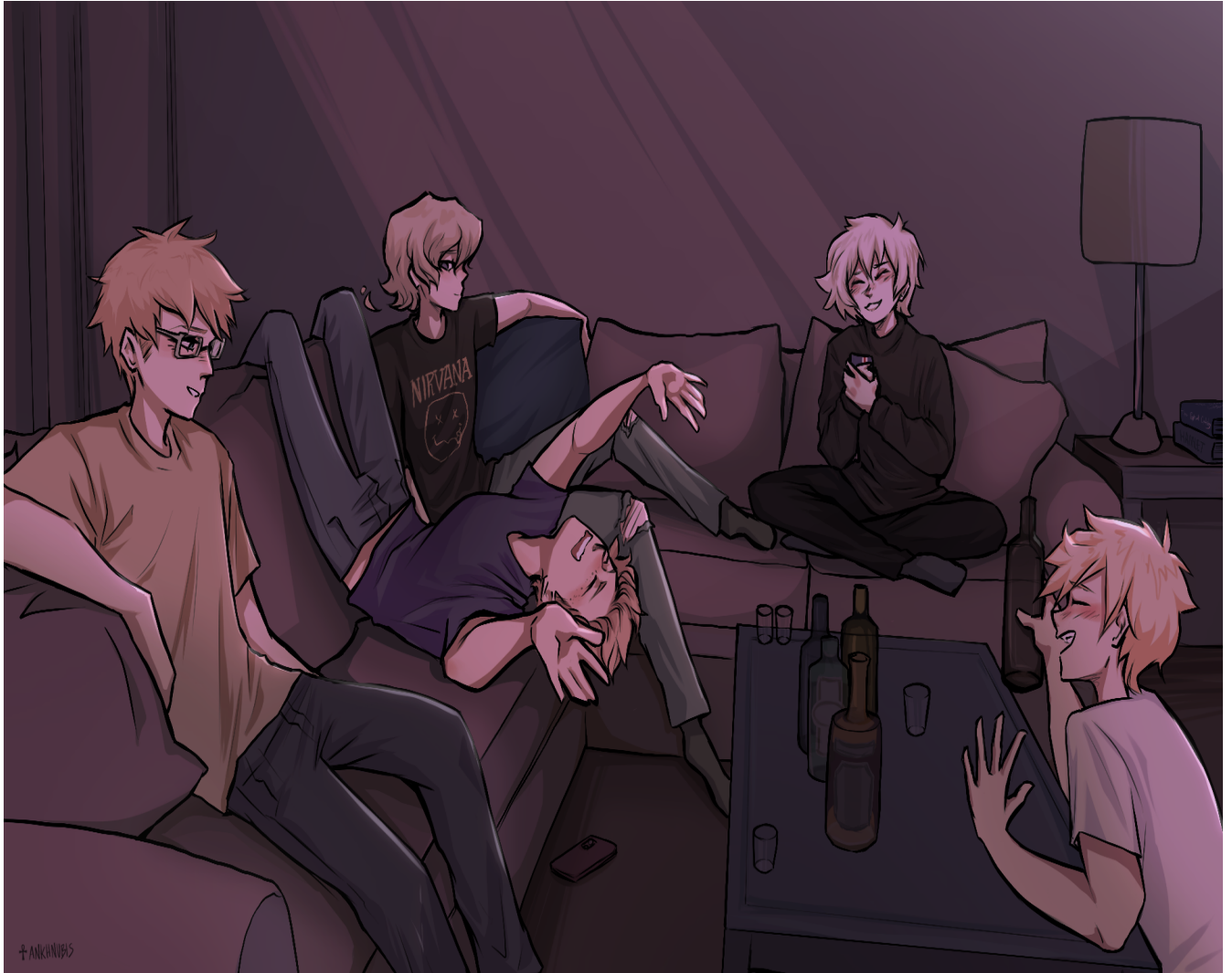
Tino could only wonder what he seemed so desperate to hide.

"Coward," Mathias muttered.

"Least I've got dignity. Show us yours," Henrik said, putting his glass back down on the table.

“Maybe I will!” Mathias said, leaning forward onto the table and feeling around for his phone. When he eventually found it, he read off a very extensive list of all sorts of strange things like ‘is amazon a river’, ‘60 seconds 1 minute same time’ and ‘if batman parents are died, Then how was he born?’

The room was filled with uproarious laughter as a very drunk and flustered Mathias attempted to explain himself.



“Stop—” he hiccuped, “stop laughing at me.” He waved his hands in the air dismissively as he moved on to his question. “Tino, why’d you leave Finland?”

Tino’s smile faded, a chill going through his already cold body. He said nothing as he drank his shot, unwilling to answer the question.

The others in the room gave him curious stares, but he disregarded them.

He’d tell them, eventually.

“Henrik, what was your first impression of me?” Tino asked.

This time he didn’t stiffen. Instead, he leaned back against the couch, staring up at the ceiling as he answered. “Thought you were nice,” he said. “Different than I expected...in a good way.”

Tino cocked his head at the answer. Different than he expected? What did he mean by that? He couldn't help but wonder as he stared across the room at the ever confusing man in front of him.

"Can I ask you the same question?" Henrik asked, moving his head up to look at Tino.

"Oh! Uh—sure!" Tino quickly replied. He scratched the back of his neck, knowing that he hadn't really judged him well. "I think I got the wrong impression of you at first. I thought you were kind of scary in the beginning but, you're really nice." He stumbled over his words, saying more than he wanted to. "And I like hanging out with you. You're a good friend, and I'm really sorry for thinking otherwise at first because I like you a lot." He blushed, realizing he said too much.

It seemed like it took a moment for Henrik to process what he had said. He looked at Lukas for a moment, who gave him an almost miniscule nod. And then that look of realization passed over his face. Henrik smiled what was probably the biggest smile he'd ever made, his eyes crinkling at the corners and his lips tugging to his cheeks.

"Lukas, do you have a bad habit?" Tino asked.

Lukas brushed a few strands of hair out of his face. "Used to." Tino cocked his head slightly, his eyes going over him before he met his gaze. "I used to be a smoker," he explained shortly. "Back in highschool. Eventually I quit. I had to be a good role model for Emil, anyway."

Emil snorted. "Mathias and Henrik were my role models back then, if you'd believe that."

Tino's eyes softened, leaning in on the coffee table and looking up at Lukas sympathetically. "Good on you for quitting," he said. He quickly sat back up and poured alcohol into everyone's glasses. "Let's have a solidarity shot!" he said, raising his glass into the air.

"For Lukas!"

They all downed their drinks.

Lukas smiled faintly as he put his glass back down on the table, leaning in to ask Tino a question.

"Is there anything you've wanted to do for a long time, but haven't?" he asked.

Undoubtedly.

Tino filled his shot glass and drank from it.

Before anyone could comment, he asked his next question.

"Emil, is there anything you're looking forward to in the morning?"

"Um—yeah, actually," he answered shyly. For the first time all night, he actually looked kind of vulnerable. "I really like eating breakfast with you guys in the morning, so uh—yeah." Lukas gave him a fond smile as Emil grabbed a couch pillow and held it to his chest, bringing his feet up on the couch.

"I love you, you know," Lukas said.

Emil turned his face away, an embarrassed blush coating his face.

"Lukas," he asked his brother as it was now his turn, "are you jealous of anyone?"

He put his hand to his chin in thought.

“Hmm,” he hummed, “maybe Arthur, because he has such a big family, or Valentin, because he has such a cute little brother.”

For some odd reason, Henrik’s smile immediately fell.

Emil’s face flared up again, and a teasing smile fell on Lukas’ lips.

“Kidding,” he said.

Emil only huffed in response.

Tino couldn’t help but smile, giggling to himself as he watched the exchange, feeling a familiar warmth in his heart.

A familial warmth.

He grabbed the bottle and poured himself another shot, and looking around the room, he filled everyone else’s glasses.

He almost hadn’t realized how much he missed that feeling.

It had been too long.

He raised his filled glass. “To family,” he slurred as he brought it to his lips. The others cheered and did the same, Mathias flopping over and laying on Lukas’ lap as he did so.

“You sure that’s a good idea?” Henrik asked, as he put his glass down on the table, eyeing Tino. “Don’t want to have too much.”

He scoffed and waved his hand dismissively. “Yeah, yeah.”

Henrik was being a pretty massive hypocrite, considering he had just taken a shot himself. Though Tino knew deep down that he was absolutely right.

Lukas moved on with his turn.

“Henrik,” he began, that little smile only growing larger on his face. “Who do you admire most in this room?”

Henrik didn’t hesitate as he answered.

“Tino,” he said.

His heart lurched.

He would’ve asked to hear it again if it wasn’t for Mathias’ inebriated laughing and teasing.

“Why Tino?” he asked. “Why not—me?”

But Henrik didn’t answer his question, simply speaking four words. “Not a hard choice.” He leaned his head back, avoiding Tino’s gaze.

His heart thumped loudly in his chest. Henrik... admired him? A flowery feeling invaded his senses as he considered what he had said. He buried his face in his forearms and he leaned against the table. Maybe someday Henrik would do more than admire him.

The man in question cleared his throat, turning to Mathias.

“Anything you regret?” he asked.

“Oh—yeah.” Mathias hiccupped, turning his head in Lukas’ lap and facing him. “I wish we hadn’t—fought so much as kids.”

Henrik only blinked. He looked somewhat... taken aback by the answer, though it was hard to tell.

“I said—a lot of stuff I shouldn’t—have... So—I’m sorry about—that.”

“Me too,” Henrik said quietly.

Mathias sat up and wrapped his arm around Lukas’ shoulders. “What about—you, Ricky? Regret anything?”

“Mathias!” Lukas hissed in a warning tone.

Tino looked at the faces of everyone in the room. It suddenly felt very tense and dark. Even Emil wore a sharp frown on his face as he watched the others in the room.

Henrik sighed and looked down, filling his shot glass and bringing it to his lips.

“You already know the answer to that,” he said grimly.

... Had something... happened between them?

Lukas whispered something in Mathias’ ear, and his eyes widened.

“Oh!” he said, pulling himself back up. “I didn’t—mean that!”

But Henrik only shook his head and placed the shot glass back on the table.

Tino shifted uncomfortably. Whatever had happened back then, bringing it up now seemed to have completely shattered the happy atmosphere. Henrik’s frown was so deep it looked to be carved into his face, while Mathias seemed to be incredibly ashamed for bringing it up in the first place. Emil’s teeth were clenched together, and even Lukas, who hardly emoted at all, looked to be tensed that it was brought up. What that it was, Tino didn’t know.

“Uh—I think that’s enough for tonight,” he said.

The others muttered in agreement.

“You should go to bed, Emil, it’s late,” Lukas said, looking across the couch at his brother.

“It’s the weekend. I’m not tired,” he said in response.

Lukas smirked a little. “Oh, is it because you have to stay up? There’s someone important you’re talking to, isn’t there?”

Emil let out a long and exasperated groan, rising to his feet and heading towards the stairs. “On second thought, I’m going to bed. Goodnight.” He didn’t spare a look over his shoulder as he disappeared up to the second floor.

Tino turned his head to look at Lukas. Using the coffee table as a support, he brought himself to his feet. “I’m gonna go—” he hiccuped, “—go get some water. Why don’t you put something on the...” he looked at the front of the room and gestured to the object he couldn’t quite remember the name of. “—the thing.”

Lukas nodded, standing up and moving to the front of the room to grab the remote. When he had it in his hands, he settled back down, letting his boyfriend rest against him once again.

“Anything you wanna watch Mathias?” he asked.

“Trashy TV—please,” he said.

“You always want to watch—”

Tino didn’t hear the rest of the exchange, too busy stumbling to the kitchen to bother listening.

He had definitely had too much to drink, his hands shaking as he reached into the kitchen cabinets. He at least remembered where the glasses were, from when Mathias had done the dishes earlier.

He grabbed a cup—plastic, as he wouldn’t have wanted to accidentally shatter a glass one—and brought it to the sink. He filled it up with water and then brought it to his lips, gulping down every drop, hopeful that it would soothe his hangover in the morning. His eyes were shut tight as the cold sensation of the water hit his throat. It felt relieving, and by the time he had finished his glass he could swear that his head was becoming clearer.

Well, maybe it would have if he didn’t notice who was standing at the kitchen’s entrance.

It was Henrik.

His face was pink from the alcohol and he shifted in his slumping stance at the doorway, his golden hair messily sitting in front of his eyes and his glasses lying crooked on his face. But even like that, he looked absolutely stunning.

“Henrik,” Tino breathed.

“Uh—” Henrik said, drunkenly pushing his glasses back up on his face. “Wanted to check on you.”

Tino ignored his statement. “Been awhile since it was just the two of us.” He gestured with his hands, signaling Henrik to come closer to him.

He obliged, stumbling forward. “... Yeah, just us.”

Tino put the cup down on the counter behind him, walking up to meet Henrik in the middle of the room. He really hadn’t noticed it before, but it seemed Henrik’s face was blushed far darker than he’d ever seen him. It was a light red—almost definitely from the alcohol.

Tino took a step forward. “Are you okay?” He stumbled slightly and was surprised when he felt Henrik’s hands on his shoulders, steadying him.

Henrik held to him. “You should go to sleep,” he said.

Sleep?

Well, sleep sounded good....

... But nothing felt as nice as the feeling of Henrik's hands on his shoulders.

Tino put his palms over Henrik's, savoring their heat as he looked up at him. He hadn't noticed it before, but Henrik's skin felt very, very warm. He moved closer to him, resting his head against his chest.

"Ah—Tino," Henrik said in a delayed gasp.

"You're warm."

"I'll take you to bed," he said. "You're too drunk."

But he was a damn hypocrite, because he was drunk off his ass, too.

He didn't voice that thought as he and Henrik stumbled out of the kitchen and headed towards the guest room. To Tino's surprise, he stopped right outside of it.

"Here," he said, "go to bed."

But Tino held to him tightly.

He was so warm.

"Come with me," Tino whined, pulling him to move closer to the door.

Henrik stumbled slightly, but didn't move any closer to it.

"I don't like that room," he said.

"Why not?" Tino pulled on him harder.

"I just don't," Henrik said firmly.

Tino stopped pulling and their eyes connected. "Please?" he begged, dragging out the word.

A look of conflict formed on Henrik's face as he stared at him. Tino held him closer.

"Fine," he said.

Tino smiled gleefully and pulled him into the room, pushing it shut behind them as they stumbled over to the bed. Their arms were wrapped around each other, and they fell down onto it together.

"Hey," Henrik protested, though it sounded like it was more out of obligation than actual want.

"Didn't say I would sleep here."

"But I need you," Tino said, pulling him closer. "I'm cold."

Henrik pulled the blankets over them and wrapped an arm around him, pulling him against his chest.

"Is it warm?"

His body was hard and firm, and Tino felt himself melting against it.

“Yes...” Tino whispered, “Thank you.” Their legs tangled into each other's underneath the blankets, as he was desperate for the heat that seemed to radiate off of him. Henrik was so wonderfully warm that Tino was confident he’d never be able to let go of him.

Their faces were inches apart.

His eyes were so beautiful.

They were like the sea...

He was firm and steady.

Like the earth...

And yet, he was right here, holding him so tightly.

Like the air...

His breath hitched, and he brought his hands to cup his face.

“You’re beautiful,” Tino whispered.

There was silence for a moment.

“Really?” Henrik breathed.

And Tino just couldn’t stand it anymore; he looked too incredible not too. He pulled his face close and pushed their lips together.

Tino felt Henrik’s body become tense before it immediately relaxed again. His grip around him tightened, and he pulled himself closer, letting themselves become lost in each other. When they broke away, Henrik was the first to speak.

“... You kissed me,” he said breathlessly, touching his lips for a moment in disbelief.

Tino nodded, bringing his hands and running them through his golden blond hair. “Yes,” he said.

“... Can I kiss you now too?” he asked.

“Please do.”

And that was all it took, because suddenly he was engrossed in the feeling of soft lips against his own. Kiss after kiss after kiss, each one becoming longer as time went on. They couldn’t be separated, and they didn’t want to be, so engrossed in each other that they wouldn’t devote time to anything else.



Tino snaked his arms around Henrik's neck, kissing him harder in drunken passion as his heartbeat rose in his chest. They pulled each other closer, shifting and twisting as their hands ran down each other's bodies. There wasn't an inch of skin that went untouched. Even in Henrik's inebriated state, he was still gentle, his calloused hands going up to become tangled in his hair.

Desperate for air, they broke away.

"Is this okay, Tino?" he asked, panting lightly. Their lips brushing together as he spoke the soft words.

“God—yes,” Tino groaned, kissing him again. They rolled a little and Tino soon found himself sitting on Henrik’s lap, looking down at him before they mashed their lips together. He sat up and Tino yanked the man’s shirt from his frame, kissing him over and over again. He was electrifying in the best way, and he couldn’t bring himself to stop staring at that gorgeous face of his. Henrik took the ends of Tino’s shirt in his hands as he looked up and met his eyes, silently asking for permission.



Tino only nodded.

And together, they let their inhibitions go.

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes



It was dark—completely black—as Henrik rubbed his eyes.

His head hurt.

His whole body hurt.

He groaned, shifting in his sleep as he felt something press up against him.

It was freezing to the touch.

Henrik wrapped his arms around the object and pulled it close.

It felt so nice... so refreshing...

He pressed his aching head against it, hoping to get some relief from his terrible hangover.

It was moving slightly, a light rise and fall...

He pulled it closer, his eyes squeezed shut in pain as he held onto the thing.

But it wasn't 'a thing'.

It shifted underneath him, and he heard soft, gentle breaths fill the air.

His eyes snapped open, but it wasn't much use—he couldn't see anything without his glasses. Everything was blurry as the light filled his eyes. He looked around the room. Though he could hardly interpret his surroundings through his fuzzy vision, he was relieved when the familiarity of the space hit him. There was the bed he was in... and the closet... and... the window.

... Was this... that room?

He looked down, and his heart seemed to stutter for a moment.

... Was he naked?

... And who was that next to him?

All he could see was that soft blond hair and all he could feel was the coldness of his touch.

He veered backwards, separating himself from the person he had been clinging to.

No, it couldn't be. His breath caught, and his chest began to rise and fall in quick, anxious movements. It couldn't be—not after all this time. It shouldn't have even happened back then. That had been a mistake—probably the worst in his life. He couldn't allow it to happen again. Not now, not ever. And especially not in this room. Not the same one. He launched to his side, feeling along the edge of the bed until he found the nightstand, which his glasses were carelessly tossed upon. He desperately shoved them back on his face.

He was relieved, at least momentarily, to see that he was wrong.

But his heartbeat didn't calm.

Because it was Tino sleeping next to him.



Tino, who was also wearing nothing save for a silver cross shaped necklace around his neck.

He rubbed his eyes, but he was still there.

His mouth suddenly felt very dry.

Had he and Tino... slept together?

He looked down at himself again, and now, with his clear vision, could see why his body ached. It was because his torso was completely covered in light bruises and scratches. But that wasn't the only

thing that was there, because that would be far too normal. And this situation was anything but normal.

On his right shoulder—just shy of his neck—sat a deep purple bite mark.

He brought his hand to it and traced the indent, gaping at it as he turned to see the sweet face of the person beside him. Would Tino really do that?

Clearly, he did.

To say that he was at a loss for words was an understatement. He was at a loss for thoughts, too. His heart throbbed in his chest as he took it all in, unable to tear his eyes away from Tino. He could hardly even talk to him, and now, here he was—waking up next to him—completely naked.

What the fuck happened last night?

But maybe it was a question he'd soon get the answer to, as Tino began to rouse next to him.

And suddenly, all Henrik could see were Tino's beautiful lilac eyes as they slowly blinked open. He let out a low groan and brought his hand to his head, running it through his messy hair as he squeezed his eyes shut again.

"Ugh," he grunted, turning away from Henrik. Tino mumbled something under his breath that he couldn't understand—almost definitely in Finnish. He rubbed his temples before reaching blindly at the bedside table, letting his hand fumble around the surface until he found his phone. He dragged it over and turned it on.

If it was possible, Henrik felt even more awkward than before. This was already a bizarre situation, and it was made worse by Tino's lack of acknowledgement. Should he say something? Alert him to his presence?

He brought his hand to his lips and cleared his throat softly. "Um—"

Henrik didn't have time to finish his thought as Tino suddenly stiffened. He let out a loud shriek, launching himself up and violently throwing the phone in surprise. He yelled something that Henrik didn't understand before turning around. His eyes were wild and panicked, but they immediately soothed once he seemed to recognize who was next to him.

"Oh," he breathed. "It's just you."

The words repeated in Henrik's head, but he didn't have time to process them as he continued speaking, his eyes closed as he continued with idle chatter.

Did he not recognize the situation they were in?

"I'm sorry," he apologized, "I didn't mean to yell. You just startled me." He laughed awkwardly. "You're so quiet, you know? Which is funny, because you have such a large presence—not that it's a bad thing, of course. It's just a little unexpected," he laughed again, and scratched the back of his neck. "I didn't even see you... or... hear you... next to me..." His words trailed off and his eyes slowly opened.

Henrik felt Tino's gaze on him, and he subconsciously pulled the blanket up over his chest, his face feeling like it was burning hot. Tino frantically looked down at himself, staring at his own bare chest as he brought his eyes back to Henrik again.

“I—oh,” he said. He cleared his throat and scratched the back of his neck again. “Henrik, did we have sex last night?” He started fiddling with the cross around his neck, clasping it in his hand.

“... I think so,” Henrik answered, his hands wringing the sheets.

They looked at each other, their eyes meeting apprehensively for a moment before the contact was broken. Tino’s face fell, a deep frown that sullied his beautiful face. He moved his hand and ran it through his hair, straw blond locks attempting to cover the stillness of his face. It was unnerving for someone so reactive and anxious to just sit there. He flipped his hand up, whisking the hair out of his eyes before pausing once again to stare blankly at the wall in front of him.

Why wasn’t he saying anything? Why was he just sitting there? Staring absently at nothing—thoughts filled with god knows what. Could he just say something—clarify what he was feeling? Henrik almost preferred to be yelled at—to feel vicious words being hurled over at him, because that was better than this tense and torturous silence.

Maybe he... His heart stuttered. Maybe he regretted it. Maybe he’d gotten too caught up in the idea of Tino liking him, that he’d fabricated everything in his head. Maybe he hated him. Maybe he hadn’t wanted to come to their stupid party in the first place. Maybe the only reason he came was of some obligation or guilt caused by the injury that now resided on his forehead. Did Tino really care? Or was that some kind of idea that he’d forced upon him—something that was never real in the first place? He clenched his teeth together, struggling to contain the emotions that were coming threateningly close to breaching on his stoic face. Could it be true that all of this was a lie? Was it something he’d only imagined in his head?

Tino didn’t love him.

He should’ve expected as much. Maybe Mathias had been right all those years ago. The words had hurt him then; they hurt him worse now. He probably shouldn’t have remembered them. They were nothing, fighting words between kids, words that were just said to make him upset, words that were said just to get under his skin, words meant to break his heart. But they echoed over and over in his head nonetheless.

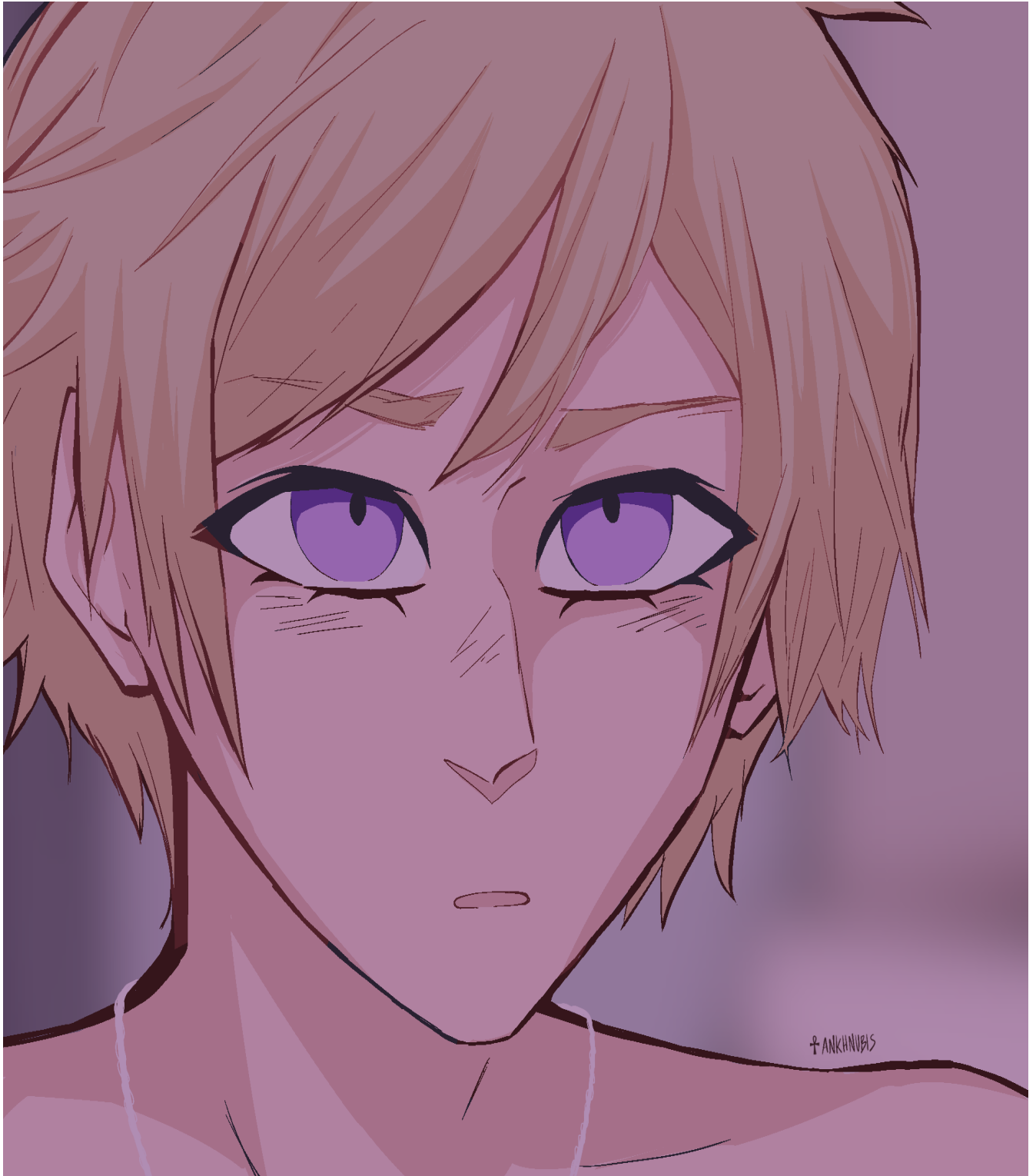
“Just face it, you’re basically unlovable. If it wasn’t for me, you’d be completely alone, and I don’t even like you!”

Mathias immediately apologized after saying it.

Still, they rang true. Of course, he was right. Because it was always meant to be that way, wasn’t it? For Mathias to get to be happy with the love of his life, and for Henrik himself to stay alone.

Clearly, he wasn’t worthy of such a thing.

Tino shook his head next to him, letting his hands fall to his lips as he let out a heavy breath between his fingers. He looked so... defeated. Their eyes met again, and through those beautiful pools of lilac, there were words that seemed to dance through them—words that sat just below the surface.



‘Why did it have to be you?’

If his heart had been ripped before, it was then that it completely shattered. It had been idiotic to think that Tino—sweet, beautiful, lovely Tino—would ever return his feelings. Because who in their right mind would love someone like him? Someone who others shrunk away from in fear, someone whose face almost always remained unmoving and cold, someone who lived 20 years of their life without ever experiencing that beautiful feeling of romantic love for someone else. He had always been destined to be alone, and Tino was just a cruel reminder of it.

Henrik turned away, numbingly shifting his legs off the bed and rummaging through the discarded clothes on the floor. Picking up Tino's first, he placed them in front of him. He pulled them on, remaining unnaturally stoic and quiet.

Henrik also had nothing to say as he found his own clothes, dragging his boxers and jeans over his bare legs and holding his shirt by the hem. He fiddled with it, not wanting to put it on because he didn't want to lose the feeling of something in his hands. He let his fingers trace over the thread, attempting to ground himself.

Tino would probably never want to talk to him again.

Henrik felt selfish, thinking of himself instead of the person he was sitting next to, but he had no idea what he was feeling. He wished he would say something, anything that could clear the air between them. Maybe he'd ruined any chance at being with him, but he at least wanted to make sure he was okay. He had to apologize to him—it was the least he could do.

"I'm sorry," Henrik said, unable to turn to face him.

A soft hand landed against his shoulder, and Henrik jolted slightly because of its frigidness.

"Don't say that," came Tino's soft and quiet voice, "please."

"But you're upset."

"I—no—," he stuttered, like he was unsure of what he was trying to say himself. "I just—, It's not that—,"

Henrik turned to face him, wanting desperately to grab at the hand on his shoulder and hold it in his. The blanket fell from his frame, but he didn't bother to fix it.

Tino's eyes flicked over him briefly, softening. "I'm the one who should be sorry," he said.

"You shouldn't be," Henrik interrupted him, his eyes downcast as he looked up to Tino. "You didn't do anythin' wrong."

"Yes, I did."

Henrik furrowed his eyebrows in clear disagreement, a reaction which made Tino laugh a little; It was short, a bit hollow even. He laid back down on the bed, staring up at the ceiling and patting the spot next to him in... invitation?

Henrik didn't dare question him, immediately lowering himself. To his surprise, Tino didn't move his hand away. In fact, he did quite the opposite; He extended it, wordlessly asking for him to hold it. It took Henrik a moment to even realize it was happening, as he willed himself to let his hand leave the shirt hem that he'd been fiddling with.

"... You're not mad?" he asked.

"No," Tino said. "Not at you." He ran his free hand through his hair before turning to face Henrik. "I just...I didn't want it to happen this way..." Was he implying that he wanted it to happen—and that...it was something he would've liked to do? Henrik's heart stumbled in his chest. "I just—God—I thought I'd changed... I really did. When I fell for you, I promised myself it'd be different. That I'd be different! But..." his voice faltered, "here we are, the same as it always is—or the same as it always used to be."

His heartbeat grew faster, his mouth falling open in disbelief at the words he heard.

Tino squeezed his hand tighter.

“I’m sorry,” he apologized. “It’s my fault it ended up like this. I used to—” he averted his eyes in shame. “I used to party a lot—back when I lived in Finland. When I was younger, I’d get drunk and have sex with any guy who’d have me—anyone who wanted me...”

Henrik could hardly believe it. Tino didn’t seem like the type of person who would do something like that... But here he was, telling him just that. As much as it surprised him—he didn’t interrupt.

“When I moved here, I stopped. I didn’t want to be that person anymore, so I worked hard—focused on school—and I was better... But then I fell for you.” He looked at Henrik sadly. “I wanted it to be different—for me to be able to love someone without it immediately getting sexual. I was so desperate for that... Because you set my heart on fire and made me feel like no one else ever had. You’re sweet, and kind, and soft-spoken, and beautiful, and—” his words strained in his frustration. “But what did I do? I couldn’t help myself, could I? I just had to fuck around and have sex with you while we were drunk.” He threw his head up. “God—I’m such an idiot.”

Henrik could hardly think straight as Tino’s words echoed over and over in his head.

Tino thought he was beautiful.

He thought he was beautiful.

No one had ever called him that before. His heart was roaring in his ears as he squeezed Tino’s hand back, unable to even think straight as the words came tumbling out of his mouth.

“Tino, I have feelings for you.” Henrik’s face was searing hot, but he didn’t care. “Ever since last year. I always wished I could tell you.” He averted his eyes. “Never thought that you’d feel the same....”

Tino yanked upright. “What?” he asked, seemingly so caught off guard that he hadn’t bothered to correct the thickness of his accent.

Henrik sat up too, his heart stuttering in his chest.

“... You do?” he asked.

“Yes.” Henrik said.

It was silent for a moment, neither wanting to break it. The pause made Henrik panic a little, suddenly feeling like he shouldn’t have said that. Was that even the right thing to say? What would be?

“Uh—sorry. That weird?”

Tino blinked at him before breaking into a small laugh, leaning over him on his knees and smiling. “No, because I like you too.”

Had he really just said that?

Tino, leaning down on him and speaking those words. Those beautiful words he’d only ever wished of him saying. Feelings he’d only ever hoped he’d return. But now, here he was... Telling him he was beautiful. Telling him he felt the same. It was like a dream, except better.

Because a dream ended, and Tino... he was right here in front of him. Because none of what he had thought earlier was true—he hadn't imagined it. Tino cared, he actually cared about him. It wasn't his imagination—or something that he'd be left to fantasize about, because it was real. Tino had said that he liked him and he meant it.

"Can I kiss you?" Henrik blurted out.

Tino nodded, his eyes crinkling at their corners.

Henrik threw his arms around Tino's neck, allowing the shirt he had been holding to drop unceremoniously to the floor. He leaned in, letting their lips meet with what was probably the most enthusiasm he'd ever shown, because hey, Tino said he felt the same, and he had meant it.



His first actual kiss... God, was it ever worth it. Because it was Tino he was sharing it with. His heart launched into his throat as they kissed. It was everything he could've hoped for. He was everything he could've hoped for. His hair was incredibly soft, and his hands sweetly cupped Henrik's face as he kissed back. His lips tasted like gingerbread and sugar, and he smelled like pine needles and roasted chestnuts.

Tino really was the embodiment of winter.

He was perfect.

It was a long while before they broke apart.

Tino smiled happily, running his hands through Henrik's golden hair as he slowly pulled away. "That was amazing," he whispered. Henrik's heart swelled; he couldn't help it. His mind almost couldn't comprehend it all. Tino, actually saying those things to him...

Tino leaned forward and tenderly kissed him again. And Henrik melted right into it because he was here with him; Because he felt the same; Because nothing else mattered except for the soft feeling of his lips gently meeting his own.

But this kiss wouldn't end nearly as sweetly, because the door was violently swung open.

Despite the frigid, deadset expression on his face, anyone could tell that Lukas was fuming. His lips were drawn in a thin line, with narrowed eyes that were violently shaded in an icy stare. Contrasting that was Mathias, who was standing behind him, laughing like a child who had just tattled on their sibling.

Tino and Henrik scrambled off each other.

"I see you've made yourselves at home," Lukas said, his arms crossed as that neutral expression he wore dipped into a slight snarl.

Henrik could do nothing but stare. He attempted to open his mouth—to say something, but Lukas put his hand up, silencing him.

"Don't bother explaining. We heard you two loud and clear last night."

Mathias let out a maniacal laugh. "Holy shit! Ricky, what happened to you!?"

Heat rushed to Henrik's face, as he was overcome with the mortifying realization that he was—in fact—shirtless, with all of those marks out in the open for all of them to see. He recoiled, his face feeling like molten lava as he desperately searched around the floor before finding his shirt and pulling it on. Tino, on the other hand—looked just as embarrassed, putting his hands over his face in shame.

"I'm sorry Lukas—Mathias—We didn't mean to! Please forgive us!" he begged.

Lukas snorted a bit at the apology. "I suppose I can forgive you," he said, holding out his hand and looking at his nails. "Even if you defiled my house." His tone was mocking, but he seemed... unexpectedly sincere.

"Your parents' house, technically," Mathias said with a snicker.

"You're not helpin', Mathias," Henrik murmured.

Lukas turned to face Henrik with a murderous glare. "You, on the other hand..."

He shrank back on the bed.

"Out. If you want to live."

With heads lowered in shame, the two of them walked toward the door, Tino slipping on his leather jacket and picking up the phone he had thrown on the way out. He reached out and grabbed Henrik's hand, seeming to need a little support as he rubbed his head. Henrik probably would've reacted more had his head not been killing him too.

Emil was already at the dinner table enjoying breakfast when Tino and Henrik arrived. He was eating from a bowl of cereal, the spoon halfway to his mouth as he moved his attention to the new arrivals in the room. His eyes met theirs, but then he paused. His spoon fell from his hand and clattered onto the table, and his mouth hung open, agape.

Henrik ignored him, lightly pulling Tino by his hand into the kitchen. He felt a tight squeeze on his palm. His heart swelled again.

"Do you want something to eat?" he asked, rubbing his thumb over their interlaced fingers, hardly believing that they were actually holding hands.

Tino leaned his head against his shoulder. "Maybe just something to drink," he mumbled, bringing his hand up to his head.

Henrik nodded, walking slowly to not jostle Tino off of him. He was leaning his head against his shoulder! He could hardly believe it! Did Tino really trust him that much? He turned and led the two of them to the counter, his heartbeat stuttering in his chest, feeling him leaning against him.

"Wait here," he whispered. Tino let go of his hand and leaned against the counter, still rubbing his head. Immediately, he missed the feeling of him, but he wasn't sure if he would like to hold hands again, so he didn't reach for them.

Henrik left his side, going to the fridge and pulling out two bottles of raspberry yoggi. He handed one off to Tino and placed the other on the counter next to him for himself.

"What's this for?" Tino mumbled, fiddling with the cap.

"Somethin' sweet," Henrik said. "Helps your head." Reaching up, he pulled out two glasses from the cabinet above him.

Tino eyed him for a moment and shrugged. Tearing the cap off, he brought the bottle up and sipped it. Henrik went back to the fridge and filled the glasses with ice. He could still feel Emil's eyes on him, but didn't acknowledge him further.

"Wow, this is really good," Tino said, bringing the drink back down. "What is it?"

"Yoggi." Henrik brought the glasses to the sink and filled them with water. "Lukas' favorite." He turned the tap off. "Mine too."

Tino nodded and drank from the bottle again as Henrik walked over to him, joining him in leaning against the counter. He put both the glasses of water down and picked up his own yoggi bottle.

The house was quiet, almost too quiet. Tino leaned his head against his shoulder again.

“Thanks,” he said, “that was nice.”

It was stupid, childish even, but his face still heated.

“Uh—you’re welcome.”

Tino’s eyes met his, giggling a little. Henrik’s face grew pinker, and he looked away.

“You’re really shy, aren’t you?”

“No,” Henrik protested.

But Tino only laughed again, shifting a little to stand a bit closer.

Henrik’s heart beat faster in his chest, but he didn’t turn to face him, not wanting to let him see how flustered he had gotten from that action alone—though he knew that Tino probably wouldn’t be able to tell. It really was unfair that Tino could have such an effect on him. He finished his yoggi with a last gulp and put the empty bottle on the counter.

The faint sounds of footsteps were heard, and Lukas and Mathias soon appeared in the kitchen. Mathias quickly busied himself with getting a glass of water, and then going to the cabinets to take his usual medication. Lukas, on the other hand, wore a small scowl on his face.

“Emil,” the boy looked up to meet his brother’s eyes, “Sleep well last night?”

Henrik and Tino stiffened in their stances.

Emil gave a quizzical stare to his brother. “Um, yeah? Why?” His lip curled slightly. “Did the rager last all night or something?” he asked sarcastically.

Lukas’ eyes narrowed more. “You could say that.”

Tino turned his face away so that Emil couldn’t see how red he had gotten.

“Well, whatever. Clearly, I didn’t hear anything. Too hard of a sleeper for it,” he said with an annoyed huff.

Relief cascaded over the both of them, thankful that at least Emil hadn’t heard anything.

Tino picked up the glass of water Henrik had gotten for him and drank from it, probably trying to relax himself and soothe his inflamed face. Henrik did the same.

Mathias slammed an empty glass down on the counter. “Well, I’m hungry, anyone else?” He looked around the room, and was met by small murmurs of agreement. “Alright! I’ll whip something right up!” This time, the eyes around the room gave him intense looks of disapproval.

“Don’t,” Emil said. “You won’t have a house to stay in if you burn this one down, too.”

Mathias ignored the comment, going to the fridge and pulling out a carton of eggs.

“Speaking of which,” Lukas said, “I’ll be having some guests over tomorrow. I need to clean the house up before they arrive. They’ll be staying until Sunday night, so I won’t be able to drive over to the apartment until Monday.”

Oh.

That would mean spending the night at Lukas' house for two more nights.

Henrik bit the inside of his cheek, but looked down at Tino. He supposed he could put up with staying here for a while.

"Aw, come on!" Mathias complained, putting the eggs by the stove. "I could drive him!"

"You? With what car? Mine? Over my dead body," Lukas said.

"Aw, babe, come on, please. I only crashed it twice," Mathias begged.

Lukas looked at him harshly.

"Okay, fine, I only crashed it three times, but I'm a good driver!" Mathias looked around the room for someone to agree with him, but no one did. "I'm a good driver!" he repeated in the same cadence.

Henrik cleared his throat before speaking to Lukas. "I can wait," he said. "It's okay."

"Good," Lukas said sharply.

"So—Lukas, who's coming over?" Tino asked with an awkward laugh.

"Arthur and Valentin, my old friends from high school," he said.

Henrik sighed a bit internally, putting down his now empty glass of water. Those two were a bit...eccentric...to say the least. This was going to be a long weekend.

After clanging around in the cabinets for a moment, Mathias pulled out a pan and put it on top of the stove. It lit with a clicking sound, and he cracked the eggs, being careful not to get the shells in the pan.

Tino's grip on his arm loosened a bit and Henrik looked down. He seemed to be a bit stressed, clicking on his phone, which now bore three cracks down its center. It must have shattered when Tino threw it... He whispered a Finnish swear under his breath, as he tapped at it.

"You okay?" Henrik asked.

"Um, yeah," Tino said, not looking up from his phone. He tapped at it harder, now putting the glass of water back down to tap at it with both hands. But the screen didn't light up, no matter what he tried. He gripped it harder in his hands. "Damn thing!"

"That thing looks completely busted!" Mathias said, "Looks like you're going to need a new one!"

"... A new one?" Tino said in a whisper that was so quiet Henrik was sure he was the only one that heard it. "... I can't...."

Henrik straightened his back. If Tino needed help, he'd surely provide it.

"Can't afford it? I could buy it for you."

Lukas let out a little snicker, teasing Henrik with his eyes. "With your Etsy shop money, right?"

Tino immediately shook his head, putting his hands up to his chest. "Oh—no, I couldn't ask you to do that. It's okay—really. I—"

“It’s okay, Tino,” Emil said from the dining room table. “We can help you out. I have some birthday money saved up.”

“Yeah, let us help you, buddy! Luke-y and I can pitch in!” Mathias cheered.

Lukas rolled his eyes, but looked at Tino. “I suppose we owe you after saving his sorry ass.” Henrik shuffled in his stance, looking away and rubbing his arm sheepishly.

Tino didn’t speak for a moment, his eyes going over the people in the room. He ran a hand through his hair and looked at the floor. “You don’t have to, really. It’s okay.”

“If you’re this worked up about it, you can just pay us back later,” Emil said, standing up and putting his cereal bowl in the sink.

Tino didn’t look up, lightly squeezing the phone in his hand before putting it on the counter. He leaned heavily against Henrik’s shoulder. “You’re all too kind to me,” he mumbled.

Mathias pulled out a couple of plates and started putting the eggs onto them before handing them out. “You’re our friend,” Mathias said with a smile, handing him a plate. “Of course we wanna help you. You’re one of us now!”

Tino looked taken aback by that last statement, looking up to meet Mathias’ brilliant cobalt eyes. “One of you? Do you really mean that?”

“Of course I do, buddy! Saving this big ol’ idiot would be enough to guarantee anyone an invite.” Henrik felt his face heat again, but this time he didn’t look away, too occupied in seeing how Tino was doing.

He held the plate in his hands, but quickly pushed it onto the counter, wrapping both Mathias and Henrik in a tight hug. “Thank you,” he said, “thank you so much.”

Henrik didn’t feel embarrassed or hot when he hugged Tino back, his chest only filling with an intense warmth as his arms wrapped around him. He was as cold as he always seemed to be, and he had to wonder if there was something he could do to keep him warm.

“Come on, guys, join us!” Mathias exclaimed.

An intense blush painted across Emil’s nose as he headed towards the group. He looked at Tino shyly before squeezing his eyes shut as he, too, wrapped his arms around him.

“... I guess I’ll join too. But only because I’m the only one sitting down,” Lukas said with a light huff. He strode over to him and joined in their group hug. “I do feel bad for you... but I’m a bit more than eager to finally have someone that can control this idiot.” He kicked Henrik in the foot.

Tino laughed lightly, squeezing everyone tightly before releasing them. “You guys are the best,” he said.

Lukas broke away first, his expression aloof but his voice soft as he moved to lean against the opposite counter, looking away. “I’m glad you’re here though...”

Mathias was the second to let go, going to stand next to Lukas and throwing an arm over his shoulder as he grinned at Tino. “Mhmm!” he hummed, “I can’t imagine us partying without you now!”

Emil, who must have realized that he and Henrik were the only ones still holding him, quickly stepped away, pulling his sweater sleeves down in what must have been shyness. "... Yeah."

Henrik was the last to step back, though he didn't move too far, slowly removing his arm from Tino's shoulder. He wasn't sure if he'd like a gesture like that one, so he awkwardly removed it, wondering if Tino thought he was being weird. "So... d'you wanna get a new phone?"

"... Okay," he mumbled. He picked his plate of eggs back up and began to eat them. Henrik did the same. "I can get us to the phone store," he said, looking up at him. "Are you okay with riding a motorcycle?"

Henrik swallowed a bit too hard.

He supposed that he'd have to be.

He gave a miniscule nod.

"Oh! Great!" Tino said, smiling. "You'll probably have to change into something with long sleeves, though. Do you have anything like that?"

"He can borrow my stuff," Mathias said. "Why don't I get something for you?"

Henrik didn't even have to give a response, as Mathias had burst into a dash and disappeared up the stairs. He could only hope that he wouldn't pick out something too strange. Lukas shook his head as he watched him go, an exasperated sigh leaving his lips. Mathias returned just a few minutes later, with two shirts, one with black and white stripes, and the other a plain white T-shirt.

"These'll do ya' good buddy!" Mathias said with a radiant smile.

Henrik frowned in distaste, but he supposed he didn't have much of a choice. He took them from Mathias, putting his plate of food down and getting up from his leaning position on the counter. He was about to leave the room when Emil asked him something.

"Where are you going? It's just your shirt."

Take off his shirt? In front of all of them? When it was in that condition?

He felt his cheeks burn.

Tino cleared his throat awkwardly, and just from looking at him, anyone could tell how sheepishly embarrassed he was. His entire face was red and angled away from Emil's sight. Mathias, on the other hand, was howling with laughter, and Lukas lightly chuckled to himself. At the reaction from everyone else, Emil gave a confused glance around the room.

"What? What's so funny?"

Henrik exited as fast as his legs could carry him.

He went back off to the bathroom to change. Ripping his old shirt off, he tossed it carelessly to the floor, replacing it with the new black and white one that Mathias had given him. Luckily, his old friend was of similar build—their only actual differences were that Henrik was taller and Mathias had a larger chest. Regardless, his clothes fit well. Henrik pulled the second shirt over himself. Mathias had probably added it for warmth, and though he wasn't nearly as susceptible to the cold as his friend was, he still wore it. A long-sleeved black-and-white striped shirt wasn't exactly his style. When he

was finished, he left and went to the living room. Tino would probably need his backpack and helmet back. He went over and picked them both up from the floor, taking note of the fact that his father's jacket was neatly folded inside.

Tino was kind of strange... he wouldn't have expected such a sweet and lovely face to wear such a scary mask, but... he liked it. He liked it quite a lot, actually. Because it was Tino's, and Tino was... everything. He hugged it tightly to his chest before loosening his grip.

He really just liked him.

He went back to the kitchen, where idle chatter had filled the room in his absence.

"-nd then, Ricky punched me in the face! And then I punched him back and-"

Henrik cleared his throat. Mathias stopped talking, but Tino was busy laughing at the story, leaning forward and chuckling to himself.

His face felt warm, but he ignored it.

"Aw come on, buddy! I was just telling Tino about how much fun we used to have! You remember those days, don't you?"

"Too well," Henrik replied.

Tino got up from the counter and stood by Henrik's side. "Ready to go?" he asked, still smiling from his laughter.

Henrik nodded at him and handed him his backpack and helmet. Tino quickly slung the bag over his shoulder and was about to turn when they heard Lukas' voice cut through the air.

"Aren't you two forgetting something?" He rolled his eyes.

The two of them glanced at each other before returning a look to Lukas.

"Ugh." He rolled his eyes again before shifting slightly and pulling out his wallet. After fishing through it for a moment, he pulled out his debit card and slid it across the table. Mathias and Emil got the idea too, and each pulled out a fifty-dollar bill for them to use.

"Thank you," Tino said sheepishly, taking it all into his hands. "I'll pay you back as soon as I can."

"Aw, don't worry about it, bud. Seriously!" Mathias laughed.

Tino didn't seem satisfied with the answer, frowning deeply as he spoke. "... If you say so." He turned his backpack around and opened one pocket, depositing it inside and safely zipping it away.

"Well, safe travels!" Mathias said with a smile, waving at them from the table.

Tino and Henrik gave a brief nod to him and left the house together, stepping into bright sunshine.

"Ever ridden on a motorcycle?" Tino asked, zipping up his jacket.

"No," Henrik said quietly.

"That's alright," he smiled, "I think you'll do fine." Tino walked over to his bike and held the handles, kicking up the kickstand and standing beside it. "Here, hold this," Tino said, handing him his

backpack. “It’ll be easier for you to hold on this way.” Henrik took it from him and Tino climbed on top of the bike, placing his helmet on his head. Once he had secured it, he held his hand out in a reaching gesture. “Come on.”

He looked so wonderful sitting there. It was almost like it was out of a fairytale—well, a fairytale if they included motorcycles, that is. Because there was his prince, holding out his hand and asking him to take it. Even with his face covered by such a strange mask, it still felt so him. Every day he learned something new about this wonderful man that he admired so much... and personally, he couldn’t wait to learn more.

Henrik pushed the backpack onto his shoulders and took his hand, pulling himself up onto the bike. When he was settled in his seat, he grabbed onto Tino’s shoulders to steady himself, but Tino laughed and turned around, flipping up his visor and looking at him.

“What are you doing?” he asked with a smile in his voice.

“Uh—holdin’ on?” Henrik asked, slightly confused by the question.

“No,” he laughed again. “They’re supposed to go lower than that. You’ll fall off if you hold me that way.”

Henrik’s face flushed.

“Right,” he mumbled. He moved his hands lower until they were wrapped around Tino’s waist—though he made sure he wasn’t holding on too tightly. He felt Tino laugh again, this time a bit harder, as he revved the motorcycle.



“Ready?” he asked, flipping his visor back down.

Henrik nodded, and together, they set off.

Tino strolled around the store with his helmet at his hip, skimming over extensive selections of phones on display. The store was pretty big, which led to there being a host of different selections. The inside of the building was pretty empty though, with their only being a couple of people inside. Artificial lights above them hung high in the air, and the floor was made of a tough, polished concrete.

“Do you see one you like?” Henrik asked.

Tino bit the inside of his cheek. All the options displayed before him were much too expensive. He didn’t want to get something that cost too much. He’d truly been surprised at his friend’s generosity, but he didn’t want to take them for granted. Something cheap would do just fine.

“These are all too expensive,” he said with a shake of his head. “Let’s look somewhere else.” He reached out his hand, his palm facing upwards, wordlessly asking for Henrik to hold it, but instead of doing so he just blinked a little, like he didn’t fully understand what he was asking—or perhaps it just hadn’t processed.

“Um—,” Tino mumbled, “May I?” He reached out a bit further, looking up at him. He knew he always felt a little cold to the touch and hoped that wouldn’t be a deterrent.

“Oh.” Henrik took his hand, which immediately filled him with a feeling of warmth. His grip was a bit tight at first, before it loosened to a more casual hold. He had a light tinge of pink on his cheeks and was acting as flustered as a schoolboy with his first crush. Tino didn’t mind it, though. He thought it was endearing.

“... You cold?” Henrik asked, looking down at his hand.

“Oh! No! Not at all!” Tino laughed, knowing that his hands were freezing. “Besides, if I was, you’d warm me up pretty fast, right?”

Henrik stiffened slightly, probably not finding the humor in his joke as he mumbled a soft “Mm.”

He didn’t protest as Tino dragged him around the store, looking down at their interlocked palms in what could’ve been content, disbelief, or perhaps something else completely. He rubbed his thumb against the skin there, seemingly idle in all other thoughts. Tino led them all around the store, taking them here and there and past brightly colored displays until he finally came across one that satisfied him. The Nokia section.

“Ah, here they are,” Tino said with a light sigh. He crouched down, letting go of Henrik’s hand and balancing with the backs of his heels. “These have always served me well, and they’re inexpensive!” he said, examining the phones at the bottom of the display.

Henrik didn’t bend down. Instead, he stayed at his full height, towering over him. “Those are old.”

Tino waved a hand in dismissal. “Yes, I know, but they’ll be good. I’d hate to take advantage of your kindness.”

Henrik shook his head, his lips falling into that familiar frown. “Not takin’ advantage of us.”

“It feels like it,” Tino replied.

He felt a hand on his shoulder and turned to see Henrik crouching next to him. “You’re not,” he said firmly.

Though he appreciated the gesture, he still couldn’t help but feel the guilt that pulled at his heart. Tino normally wouldn’t have accepted an offer like this, but he really didn’t have much of a choice. He was alone in a foreign country, and without his phone, he was completely isolated from his entire family. It was daunting—terrifying even, to be without that. He could hardly bear the thought. To be... completely alone.

A shiver ran up his spine.

“Thank you,” Tino whispered, bringing his hand up over Henrik’s.

Though he had been kind, he still wouldn’t make him do any more than he had to.

“Like this one?” Henrik asked, plucking a box from around the middle of the shelf and handing it to him. “It’s newer.”

It felt sturdy in his hands, and the box was sleek and smooth. Maybe it would’ve been a good choice, if not for its enormous price tag. Tino immediately recoiled.

“Four hundred dollars?!” He exclaimed in a hushed whisper. “That’s way too much!”

“You think so?”

“Yes!” Tino shoved it back to him. “No way!”

Henrik returned it to the shelf. “... Pretty standard for a phone, though.”

Tino ran a hand through his straw-blond hair. “I know...”

Henrik tightened his grip on his shoulder, comfortingly rubbing his thumb against him; Tino leaned in close.

“Sorry,” he whispered.

“It’s okay, Tino,” Henrik said back.

They sat there quietly for a moment, no words falling between them as they stared ahead. It’s not that he didn’t want to speak, rather that he didn’t have the words. He leaned in on Henrik more, letting his head sit against his shoulder.

“It’s no trouble,” Henrik said.

Tino said nothing in response.

Henrik reached up again and pulled out another phone. “This one better?” He handed it over.

This one was different. The box was a lot smaller, and it felt a lot lighter. He flipped over the box.

Two hundred dollars.

It was half the price of the first one, and yet it was still a sizeable amount of money. It almost felt rude to take it. But, he doubted that he’d be able to find something cheaper...

He gave a brief nod. “Yeah, that one’s good,” he said.

Henrik nodded back to him, and they both rose to their feet. Shyly, he stuck his hand out in a stilted and awkward manner that would’ve made Tino laugh if not for the slight, nervous smile on his lips. Tino took his hand and squeezed it.

“It’s nice,” Henrik said.

“Thanks.” Tino rested his head against the other man’s shoulder, feeling the need to lean on him for support. It surprised him a little that Henrik stiffened slightly as he did so before immediately relaxing, almost like it wasn’t something he was used to. Tino squeezed their intertwined hands together, not sure if it was for his own reassurance or for Henrik’s.

Much like the rest of the building, the front was sparsely populated, save for a singular clerk. He looked young—he couldn’t have been older than nineteen—though he was built like an athlete, with broad shoulders and toned muscles that pressed against the collared shirt he was wearing. His glasses were pure white and perfectly perched on the bridge of his nose. He wasn’t really paying attention to his surroundings though, too busy fiddling with the cowlick at the front of his beach blond hair to notice anyone approaching him. From his nametag, Tino discerned his name was Alfred.

Henrik straightened his back and cleared his throat. “...’scuse me.”

The clerk jolted and looked up at him. “Uh—Hi,” he stammered, “find everything okay?”

“Yes,” Henrik said. His voice was stiffer and harsher than it normally was, far different from the voice he used to talk to Tino.

Tino placed the phone on the counter and slid it across in offering. Alfred quickly scooped it up and scanned it. Tino squeezed Henrik’s hand tightly.

“Th—That’ll be two hundred and five dollars and fifteen cents—dude. Would you like to use cash or credit?” Alfred asked, stuttering and stammering like he was afraid.

“Both,” Henrik replied.

Alfred gave a nervous cock of his head. “I’m sorry. Can you repeat that?”

“Both,” Henrik said again, putting two cards on the table along with Emil and Mathias’ cash.

“Oh—right—of course,” Alfred squeaked. He put the cash into the drawer of his cash register, but stopped when he looked at the cards.

They were in two different names, Tino realized.

Henrik stood up straighter. “All good?” he asked, narrowing his eyes.

Alfred gave a quick glance to Tino, perhaps looking for some kind of assistance, which he did not give. He leaned harder against Henrik and felt the hand that once held his own wrap protectively around his waist. He thought his sudden confidence was strange, though he didn’t question it. Perhaps it was a part of this little ‘act’ he was putting up.



The clerk pulled at the collar of his shirt and nodded, though the strange glance he gave the two of them didn't escape Tino's notice. "Um—yeah, all good. I'll split the remaining between the two cards,

okay?”

Henrik nodded.

“Um—Alright,” Alfred said, his voice a bit too high to sound comfortable as he ran the cards through the register. He pushed the receipt, the phone, and cards across the table to Tino. “Uh—here you go, dude.”

Tino reached into his pocket and pulled out his broken cell before sliding it across the counter. “Can you transfer the sim card?”

The clerk seemed to be relieved that someone other than Henrik was talking to him because he flashed him a toothy little grin. “Oh, sure thing!” He picked up the phone and got to work.

He liked the feeling of Henrik’s hand around his waist, in a way he wasn’t sure he could describe. It was like he was ‘prized’, something that Henrik was proud of and wanted to show off as ‘his’. Even if it was only for the sake of intimidating the cashier, he liked feeling valued in that way. It’s not like he had ever experienced that before. Tino snaked his hand over to Henrik’s sleeve and pulled on it. And like a flip of a switch, he loosened.

“Hm?” he hummed, leaning down slightly.

From the way he looked at Tino, it was like he’d never had a glare at all. It had completely disappeared from his face. Though he came off as intimidating to others—intentionally or not—Tino knew the truth. He knew that he was actually one of the sweetest people he’d ever met.

“You’re cute,” Tino giggled into Henrik’s ear.

And there was that stiffness again. His face turned to a light rosy pink as he straightened his back, returning to his full height. It was probably the most flushed he’d ever seen him—well, other than last night. But that sort of thing hardly counted. He’d been drunk after all.

“I’m not,” he mumbled.

Oh, but he was.

Tino laughed and pulled on his sleeve again, and he once again leaned down.

This time, Tino didn’t let him get off so easily. Henrik deserved a little something—for being so generous. He took the sides of his face in his hands and gave him a brief peck on the forehead, right where that new injury had formed. He supposed this kiss could also be an apology for causing such a thing to appear on his lovely face.

“I think you are,” he said.

He was glad he could say it. And though he could have imagined it, he thought he saw his lips curl upwards into a tiny little smile. His face was flushed a bit deeper, with what was probably shyness and embarrassment as he straightened himself back out. His grip on Tino’s waist loosened, and he once again reached for his hand.

Of course, Tino happily took it, squeezing it twice for good measure.

“Um—here you go!” Alfred said, sliding both phones over to Tino. He had a bewildered expression on his face, but said nothing more as he watched the two of them pick up their things.

“... Thanks,” Henrik said.

“Uh—yeah—anytime, dude!” Alfred stammered.

With both phones now pocketed, Tino and Henrik turned and left the store. Their hands still locked together tightly.

Once again, Tino allowed himself to chuckle a little as he looked at Henrik, leaning happily against him as they walked.

“Stop laughin’ at me,” Henrik pleaded half-heartedly, looking bashfully to the side.

Tino squeezed his hand. “Sorry, sorry,” he said, still giggling a little, “I can’t help it.” Henrik rubbed his fingers against their joined hands. “I think we’ll have fun together...”

Henrik stopped walking.

“What do you mean?”

Had he done something wrong? He felt his face flush a little.

“Oh—you know, like...” Tino said, awkwardly scratching the back of his neck. “I like you—and I want to see where this goes.” He was growing redder by the second. “You know? Because I want this to keep going and—um,” he cleared his throat. “So, do you want to go on a date sometime?”

Tino didn’t even have time to look at Henrik’s face for an answer before he did.

“Yes,” he answered almost immediately. “That’d be good.”

Oh.

Oh wow.

He actually said yes... He almost couldn’t believe it. Maybe he was better than he had been.

“Really?” Tino asked excitedly. “That’s great! Are you busy tomorrow? We could do something then if you’d like!”

Henrik nodded. “That’d be nice.”

It felt kind of... surreal.

“Well—” Tino stammered slightly, “is there anywhere you’d like to go? You can pick, my treat, because, well, you know.” He gestured to the phone in his hand.

“Library sounds good,” Henrik said.

Tino tilted his head to the side. He hated the library... didn’t he? Why would he want to go now?

“...I’d like to...read the book you were talkin’ about,” Henrik mumbled, squeezing Tino’s hand and bashfully looking away.

Tino happily squeezed it back. “I’d like that,” he said.

“Uh—” Henrik stuttered slightly as they arrived at Tino’s motorcycle. “Can I—”

But Tino already knew what he was going to ask.

Gently, he pushed him down onto the bike and kissed his lips.

He tasted wonderful, like sweet candy, and he smelled like sandalwood and clean linen. He reminded him of the earth—grounded and steady as his eyes fluttered shut. Henrik never moved too quickly, and was always slow to make advances, something that Tino thought was very cute and endearing. He was stability; And did he ever need that.

“You don’t have to ask, you know,” Tino laughed, covering his mouth with his hand.

Henrik wrapped his arms around Tino’s neck, his sea-green eyes soft as he stared up at him. His lips curled up slightly, and he leaned forward.

“If you say so...” he said.

And then he kissed him.

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes



“So,” Tino said, leaning forward slightly on his motorcycle, his helmet sitting between his legs in his lap. “I’ll pick you up tomorrow?”

“Mm.”

“Great!”

Henrik slid off of the bike, handing Tino back his backpack and standing beside it.

“Don’t worry, I’ll bring my car tomorrow,” he said with a laugh. “Wouldn’t make you ride this thing more than you have to.”

“I don’t mind.” Henrik mumbled.

Tino chuckled, “I think you do. You’re just afraid to say so.”

But Henrik shook his head, letting his mind recall how nice it felt to have wrapped his arms around Tino’s waist, and having to hold him tightly while they rode. He was actually a pretty good driver, and seemed to take Henrik’s comfort into consideration, not going nearly as fast as he clearly wanted to.

Riding that thing was definitely something he was going to have to get used to, though.

“I’m not,” Henrik said.

Tino laughed again and reached his hand forward, placing it on Henrik’s cheek. “Are too.”

Henrik leaned forward, his eyes lightened with playful spirit. “Am not.”

“Are too,” Tino said, pulling him closer.

“Am not.” Henrik wrapped his arms around Tino’s neck, but hesitated for a moment. He knew Tino said he didn’t have to ask for permission anymore, but he still felt unsure. He didn’t want to make him uncomfortable.

“Well?” Tino asked mischievously, balancing his feet on the sides of his motorcycle as he leaned closer.

Henrik’s face was consumed by his bashfulness, but he leaned forward, pressing a soft kiss to his lips that was happily returned. He thanked whoever rested above him that Tino was so confident in situations like this, otherwise; he wasn’t sure he’d ever be able to kiss him. Not that he didn’t want to, of course. He was just too awkward about it. He didn’t have much experience when it came to things like this. It really felt like a dream, that they were exchanging kisses and holding hands. He didn’t want to let go, engrossed in the feeling of Tino’s soft lips against his own. He was excited and enthusiastic—he knew what he wanted—and Henrik liked that quite a lot. When they broke apart, they rested their foreheads together, their eyes gently fluttering open as they looked at each other.

There was a silence, like words were supposed to have fallen between them, but there was nothing.

They pulled apart.

“Well, I hope you have fun with Lukas’ friends.”

“I will,” Henrik responded, even though he knew he wouldn’t.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, okay?”

He nodded.

And with that, Henrik stepped back, and Tino resettled on his motorcycle, pulling his helmet back on his head before turning his bike back out on the road. He flipped up his visor, giving a playful little smile as he revved the engine.

“Bye-bye!” he waved.

“Bye-bye,” Henrik echoed back under his breath, raising his hand and returning the gesture.

And then he was gone. With careful steps, Henrik turned and walked back to Lukas’ home, being cautious not to step on any of the fairy houses that lined the pathway to the front door. The sudden lack of Tino’s presence permeated in the surrounding air. Was it pathetic that he already missed him? Maybe a little. He sighed as he opened the front door, letting the cool air from inside hit his face.

None of the lights in the house were on—which wasn’t unusual when Arthur and Valentin were visiting—instead, it was illuminated by hundreds of candles, each flickering with hot flames. It was a huge fire hazard; if Tino was here, he’d probably have a heart attack.

“Hey buddy!” came Mathias’ voice. “Welcome back!”

Henrik looked around the room, but didn’t see him. He pulled his glasses off his face and cleaned them with his shirt before returning them to their rightful spot.

It had been a pointless endeavor, as he was still nowhere in sight.

“So? How’d it go? I saw you and Tino smoochin’ out—”

“Shut up,” Henrik interrupted him, an embarrassed flush falling over his cheeks.

“Aw, come on,” Mathias teased. “I’m proud of you! You finally did it!”

“It took him long enough,” said a dry voice from what sounded like Emil.

“You’re telling me. You didn’t even have to deal with him most of the time, always staring with that enamored look on his face.” Lukas. He didn’t have to see his face to know that he was rolling his eyes.

Henrik stepped forward into the house and shut it behind him, deciding to head to the living room, where he saw three figures draped in long black cloaks. Henrik frowned. Lukas always had them do strange things when his friends were coming over; he didn’t really understand him sometimes.

The person sitting in between the other two stood. He didn’t raise his hood. Instead, he pulled another cloak out of his robe and handed it to him.

“Put this on,” Lukas said.

Henrik took it from him. Not having the energy to argue, he halfheartedly swung it over his neck and shoulders.

Both of them went back down and sat on the couch together, Henrik going to sit next to the largest figure, knowing it to be Mathias.

“Did the payment go through okay?” Lukas asked.

“Went fine,” Henrik said, reaching into his back pocket and handing him back his debit card. “Thanks for helpin’.” Tino appreciated it.”

“It’s the least we could do after he saved your sorry ass,” Lukas said.

“Aw, give him a break Luke-y, he and Tino are a thing now,” Mathias teased, elbowing Henrik gently. “All’s well that ends well!” he snickered.

“You can say that again,” Lukas said. Henrik’s face burned, and he cleared his throat.

“So are you, like, dating now?” Emil asked, poking his head out of his cloak.

... Were they dating...?

Tino let him hold his hand; he had said he didn’t need permission to kiss him... and they had done that quite a lot today... not to mention last night... but no, that’s all ridiculous. Nonsense even. He wouldn’t say a thing about their relationship without Tino’s word. Because surely he knew what they were.

Because Henrik sure didn’t.

“No,” Henrik said.

“What?!” came three voices all at once.

“You’re not together?! But you guys were making out like, two minutes ago!” Mathias shouted.

“It’s Henrik, are you kidding? Of course, he wouldn’t be with him yet!” said Emil.

“You love testing my patience, don’t you?” Lukas grumbled.

Henrik sat up straighter in his seat, the frown growing deeper on his face.

He knew they were teasing him, but it still bothered him that they were saying these things. He wouldn’t want to make Tino uncomfortable, and he wasn’t about to squander whatever chance he had been blessed with by moving too quickly. Tino would tell him what they were when he was ready, and that was good enough for him.

“... Have our first date tomorrow, though.”

“Thank god,” Lukas breathed.

“Really?” Mathias asked, bouncing excitedly in his seat. “Where are you going?”

“The library,” Henrik mumbled.

Mathias recoiled slightly in confusion as he peaked his head out of the cape. “The library? But you haven’t read a book since, what, before I met you? Why there?”

Henrik sat up straighter in his seat. “Not your concern.”

Emil huffed in annoyance, “Come on, aren’t you gonna tell us anything? You should at least tell Mathias. It’s because of him that you’re even with him in the first place.”

It kind of hurt that it was true. He always had Mathias to thank for getting him somewhere, at least socially. It kind of stung a little, but there wasn't anything he could do about it now. Mathias was a dumb, but ultimately well-meaning idiot who had always been able to make friends. He was the reason he now had Lukas and Emil, wasn't he? Tino now too... Even if he didn't want to admit it, he was glad he was around.

"I suppose..." Henrik said.

"Great!" Mathias yelled enthusiastically. He got up from his seat on the couch and moved to Henrik's other side, eagerly leaning in to listen. Lukas rolled his eyes, but he and Emil scootched closer.

"He was gonna show me a book... before the party on Friday. We didn't get to read it, though." Henrik said, twiddling his fingers together.

Mathias elbowed him several times in the shoulder. "Aw, look at you! Finally getting yourself out there, I'm proud of you!"

A light smile found its way onto his lips, though he looked down so no one could see it. It felt nice to hear, even if it was too embarrassing to say something nice in return.

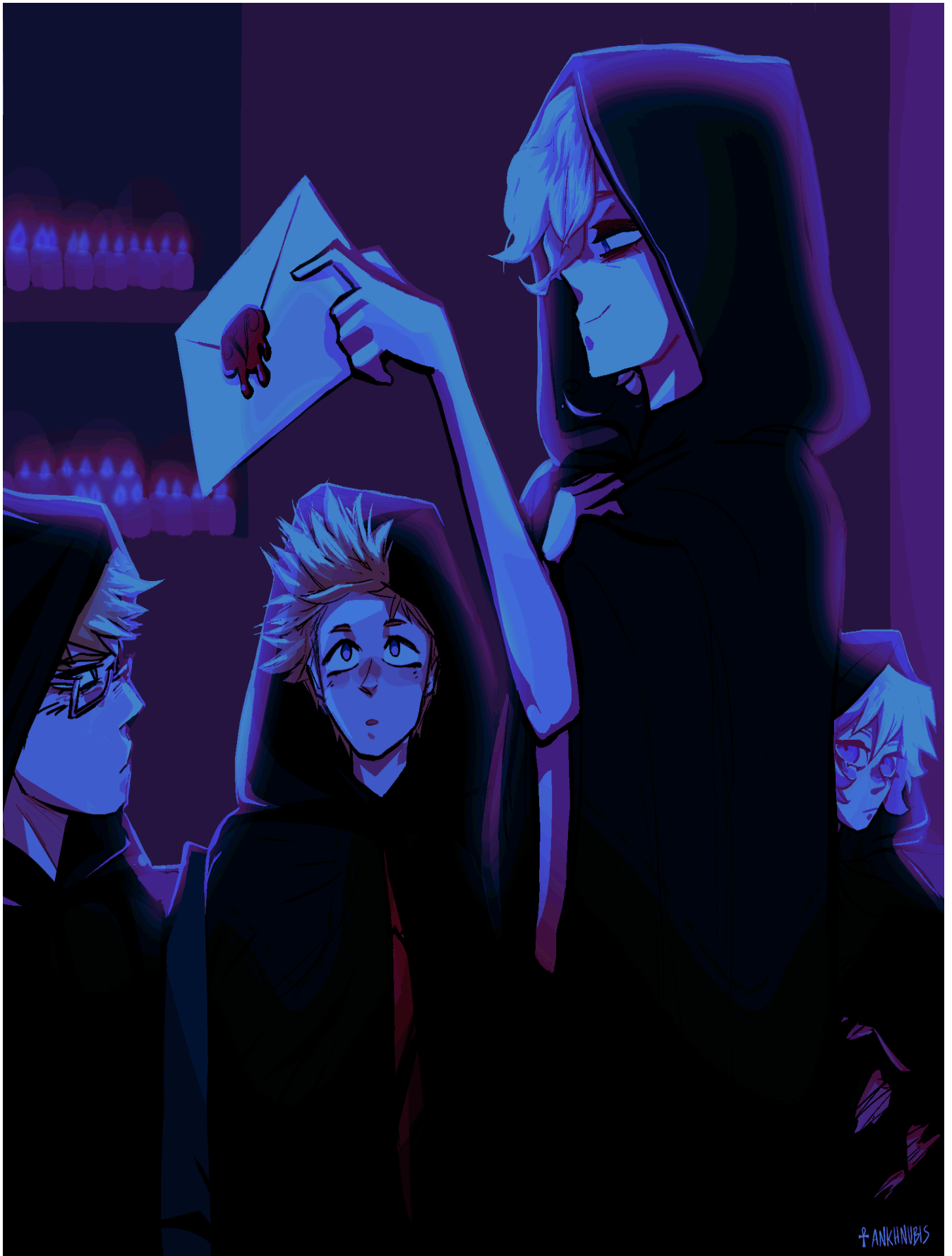
Lukas stood up. "Well, as nice as that is. I have some more preparation to do." He pulled a letter out of his cloak. The wax seal was blood red with a V carved into it. "Valentin told me that his baby brother is going to be coming this time." He used the letter to gesture at Henrik. "You're okay with taking care of him, aren't you?"

No, no way. He couldn't. That kid was an absolute nightmare. He was about to protest, but Lukas narrowed his eyes.

"You owe me," he said.

Considering what had happened last night, he supposed he did. He gave a defeated nod.

"Excellent," Lukas said with a cruel smile. "Nicu will be so happy."



He could only hope.

“They’ll be here at the first stroke of midnight. Mathias, come with me. I need you to ready the blood scythe.”

Mathias leapt up from his seat. “Whatever you say, Luke-y!”

The two of them disappeared into the darkness.

Emil moved closer to him on the couch and leaned against Henrik’s shoulder. No words fell between them.

But even as he was covered with a long black cloak and sitting in a dark room illuminated solely by candles, he couldn’t think of anything but Tino. His soft blond hair, his lilac eyes, and a smile that lit up the room.

He could only wonder what he was up to right now.

“Eleven, twelve!” shouted Eduard, his speech slurring slightly as he leaned back in his seat.

Raivis slammed two shot glasses down on the coffee table he was kneeling in front of.

“That’s what, a record?” Eduard hiccuped.

“I don’t think so,” Tolys said, himself sipping on a bottle of beer and leaning against the wall across the room. “Wasn’t it fifteen?”

“Twenty-five,” Raivis said with a frown.

Tino nudged him. “Don’t get upset, they’re too drunk to remember, anyway.” Unlike his roommates, he wasn’t drinking anything.

They were sitting in the living room of their town house. Legs crossed and leaning on furniture as Tino watched his friends drink. It was a quiet neighborhood, with many small families and a little park that was across the street. Inside their house, though, it was loud. The carpet was old and had more than a few stains from the spillage of drinks. In the middle of the room was their couch and, directly in front of that, their coffee table. None of the lights in the house were on, save for the blinking of the Christmas tree in the corner of the room. There was a mantel and a fireplace, which displayed stockings hand embroidered by Tino with each of their names.

To be honest, he wasn’t really sure how much time he had spent just sitting on the floor with them and chatting. All he really knew was that it was now completely dark outside, and that they’d been talking for a very long time.

Raivis leaned back, letting his knees fold beneath him as the frown grew deeper on his face. “They never remember,” he said.

Tino patted his shoulder softly. “They’ll remember once they’re sober.”

Raivis exhaled hotly, and Tino knew he didn’t believe his words.

“So, Tino, having fun with that dashing guy you saved?” Eduard teased.

Tino’s heart sped up a little in his chest, but he tried not to let the feeling show on his face. “Yes, we have a date tomorrow.” He smiled a little, remembering the feeling of Henrik’s fingers interlaced with

his own.

“At least one of us has a good love life...” Tolys mumbled, bringing the bottle of beer to his lips and leaning hard against the wall.

Eduard scoffed and rolled his eyes. “Please,” he said, “I’m much happier without having to deal with any of that. You’re all a mess.”

For as long as Tino had known him—Eduard had never seemed interested in romance. He’d always bat his hand—insisting that it was something that just wasn’t for him. Tino had thought it was strange at first, but who was he to judge his friend? He was happy, and so long as that was true, he’d wholeheartedly support him. Besides—he’d always been encouraging to him, telling him to get himself out there and find someone for himself. Of course, he’d always dismissed that. Why wouldn’t he be? After a past like his...

“I am not a mess,” Tolys replied, his tone harsh.

“Oh yes you are,” Eduard retorted, throwing his bottle up and finishing it. “Let me remind you that you’re the one who dated Ivan Braginsky for over three years.”

A chorus of sighs swept through the room.

“Ugh, stop,” Tolys groaned.

“Can we not talk about him?” Tino said with a heavy frown.

Raivis huffed in agreement.

Ivan was... the worst. He and Tolys had a very messy breakup, one that he would spare the details of retelling. Not that he even liked him while they were dating. Ivan was overbearing and obsessive, not to mention creepy. Even though Tino had been there to support Tolys through their breakup a year ago, he’d secretly been very happy that they were no longer together.

He had a feeling that their other friends felt the same.

“Why not?” Eduard teased. “He was your first love, wasn’t he?” He fluttered his eyelashes and playfully rested his head against his interlocked palms. “Didn’t you say you’d be together forever?” Raivis laughed a little, but put his hand over his lips to hide it.

Tolys scoffed, his voice growing more firm. “Stop it.”

“But it’s so easy,” Eduard laughed.

Tolys rolled his eyes. “You know what else is easy? Being a damn robot. It must be so amazing, never loving anyone.”

“Hey! That’s not true!” Eduard interjected, crossing his arms. “I love Tino and Raivis, and I would normally say that I love you too, but you’re being very difficult right now.”

“I’m being difficult?” Tolys said through narrowed eyes. “You’re difficult. Difficult to love.”

“Okay! That’s it,” Tino said, getting up and collecting bottles of alcohol from around the room. “You two are too drunk.” Even if he didn’t like Ivan, letting them fight like this would only lead to hurt.

“Aw come on, Tino, please,” Eduard begged, “We’ll be nice, I promise.” He clung to Tino’s foot as he walked past, but he shook him off.

“No, you’ve had enough,” Tino said.

For once, Tolys didn’t join in the protest, and surrendered his alcohol without so much as another word. Perhaps he thought he was getting too drunk too. Raivis, on the other hand, was gulping down a bottle of Balsam. Tino didn’t bother to take it from him; trying to prevent Raivis from drinking was a hopeless endeavor.

With all the bottles in his arms, he carried them off to the room next to them—the kitchen—and began putting them away.

Eduard and Tolys really had been at each other’s throats lately. It wasn’t like them. A shiver ran up his spine. He didn’t like them being like this. Was it too much to ask that everyone would just get along?

When he returned to the living room, Raivis was standing up, his bottle of Balsam now empty as he rambled on about something or another.

“What’s the point of it all? Everything is pointless. What happened? The world used to be so beautiful... but it seems like such things only grow darker as time goes on... Can’t you sense it?”

“Shut up,” Tolys grumbled.

Tolys was like two different people. He was so kind and sweet when he was sober, always making an effort to be considerate to other people. But when he was drunk, he let that all go. Tino had to wonder if this other side of him was what his actual personality was like underneath it all. He really hoped that something like that wasn’t the case. Tolys had always had that parental energy to him that left him with a warm feeling. He just wished he’d stop drinking so much.

Tino sighed and sat back down on the floor. “We’re never going to find a new roommate if you guys keep acting this way.”

“We don’t need one,” Eduard said. “It’s fine how it is.”

Tino crossed his arms. “It’d be fine if you all stopped spending all your money on alcohol instead of paying rent.”

Raivis groaned as he sat back down on the floor, putting his hand through his hair in annoyance. Eduard and Tolys simply rolled their eyes.

“Come on, we haven’t made a late payment in like, four months,” Eduard said, leaning back in his seat.

Tino’s frown grew deeper.

“Okay, fine, two months,” he said. “But come on, we don’t spend that much on our alcohol.”

“But wouldn’t it be nice to have more spending money?” Tino argued. “Hell, Henrik and his friends had to buy me a phone because I couldn’t afford one.”

“Oh,” Eduard hummed, “he got that for you?”

Tino scoffed and rolled his eyes. "I would've turned him down if I didn't need to keep in contact with my family. You know that."

Raivis leaned in with interest, his voice soft, as if he were in longing. "He loves you, you know," he said.

Tino felt his face grow hot. "Stop it."

"Mutual love is no slave to the shackles of time." Raivis said.

... Tino had absolutely no idea what that was supposed to mean, but that's kind of just how Raivis was.

Eduard rolled his eyes and reached forward for his drink, but seemed to have forgotten that it had been taken from him. He returned his hand with a disappointed whine.

A silence fell between them for a moment.

"Actually," Tolys began, "I'd love to have another roommate, so I don't have to be stuck alone with you alcoholics." He closed his eyes and leaned his head against the wall.

It was quiet again.

Raivis moved closer to Tino.

"What's this love like, Tino? How does it feel to have his heart?"

"Stop!" Tino said again, "I don't have anyone's heart!"

Raivis' eyes turned darker. "You'd have to be blind to not see it. He looks at you like no other." He clutched his hand to his heart. "If only..."

"What are you on about?" Tolys asked with a roll of his eyes.

Raivis' cheeks grew slightly pink. "I've been seeing someone," he said.

Everyone straightened their backs in surprise.

"Really?" Eduard asked. "Who? Why didn't you tell us?"

Raivis shrunk back. "I don't know him yet."

The three others exchanged looks of confusion before turning back to Raivis.

"I'm sorry," Tino apologized, "What?"

"We've never spoken, but he always passes me by..."

Eduard raised an eyebrow skeptically, "So..."

Raivis interrupted him. "Have you ever been in the presence of someone, and suddenly felt like something important in your life was going to happen?"

He was getting more and more confusing by the minute. But this was Raivis. Surely he'd have something more to say. If only he could get the words out.

“What did he look like?” Tino asked.

Eduard shrugged. “He’s just a random passerby, right? Hard to expect him to remember exactly what he looked—”

“He was tall, Tino,” Raivis interrupted again, “much taller than me. And he wore his sunglasses on the top of his beautiful raven hair—”

Eduard and Tolys groaned.

“—which had a single curl that bounced rebelliously above the rest. The shirt he wore massively draped over his form, but was tucked in by the belt, which brandished a silver buckle that depicted a dragon. He had three chains, one around his neck, one at his hip, and the final one dripping down from his ear. And his eyes—” he stopped to sharply inhale before softly letting the breath leave him, “Oh, how his eyes shone, like two rhinestones in the dark cave of my existence. For a brief moment I was able to see them, but...” he trailed off sadly, “...it seems that I have once again lost them.”

“You know, Raivis, our university offers free counseling,” Tolys said.

Raivis scoffed but otherwise said nothing, sitting back and crossing his arms.

“You’re one to talk about free counseling,” Eduard mumbled.

“What was that?” Tolys snapped.

“Oh nothing,” Eduard said, “I was just suggesting that you get your head checked, you know, because you used to date Ivan.”

“Can you stop with that?!” Tolys said angrily.

This was going too far.

“He understood me! He was nice!”

“Are you kidding?!” Eduard yelled back. “He was a total creep! He gave you scars, Tolys!”

“That was an accident!” He retorted, “That’s not fair!”

“Ivan is a total psycho!”

“Don’t call him that,” Raivis interjected.

“Why do you care?” Eduard scoffed.

“Just don’t call him that,” Raivis said again.

“Why not? He was a terrible boyfriend and an even worse person. He was sick in the head.”

“Stop it!” Raivis yelled.

Tino stood. The tenseness in the room was growing to be far too much.

“Okay, that’s enough.” He pulled Eduard and Tolys up by their arms. “You two are going to bed.”

Their annoyed bickering fell deaf on Tino's ears as he dragged them up the stairs by their arms, leaving Raivis behind on the floor. Both of them continued to snap and yell at each other until Tino pushed them into their respective rooms. He could be thankful that they would stay there until the morning, at least.

He breathed a harsh sigh.

They had been fighting a lot lately.

He really wished things would just go back to normal.

He descended the stairs once again, to see Raivis staring blankly at the wall ahead, his chin resting on his forearms as he leaned against the couch.

It broke his heart to see him like that. As hard as Raivis' eyes were, he really was soft at heart... much like someone else he knew.

"Are you okay?" he asked gently, kneeling next to him.

He turned his attention to him, dirty blond hair falling over his face that he didn't bother to move. "You're lucky," he said.

"Lucky?" Tino asked.

"You have someone who cares about you."

Tino immediately draped his arms over his friend's shoulders. "Raivis, I care about you! Don't say things like that!"



He didn't move in his arms, not saying anything as he closed his eyes and leaned into Tino's embrace.

“Seriously, you mean a lot to me.”

Raivis stared at him for a moment, those deep moon-like eyes seeming to take in his very being. He looked like he was in another world completely.

“...You don’t think Ivan’s crazy...do you?”

Tino bit the inside of his cheek. Obviously, Raivis had been upset about what Eduard had said. But he had been right. Ivan was an obsessive, creepy, terrible man—one that he couldn’t be happier was out of Tolys’ life.

But why did Raivis care so much? He hated him just as much as the rest of them... and yet...

“No, I don’t think that,” Tino said, patting his hair soothingly.

Raivis relaxed against him, breathing a sigh of relief as he turned his deep, sunken eyes up to him. They were like pure cerulean.

The two of them were quiet again. Neither wanting to break the silence.

Tino couldn’t stop himself, pausing to wonder just how much Eduard’s words had hurt him.

“Tino,” he mumbled.

“Yes?” he immediately answered.

“Please, love him with all your heart. Some of us aren’t destined to be as lucky as you.” He pushed Tino’s arms off him and stood. “Golden ties of fate will forever stand in your favor.” He turned and retreated up the stairs.

Tino could only wonder what the hell he meant by that, as he was left alone in the dark living room.

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes



When Tino arrived outside Lukas' house, he was immediately struck by how dark the place looked. It was the middle of the afternoon, but the curtains were drawn so no light could enter it. The little houses in the lawn seemed to have multiplied since he'd last been here, and as he got closer to the house they became harder and harder to avoid. He came to the front door and knocked on it, hitting the wood with three solid knocks.

The door opened, but only a crack, revealing the face of Mathias hidden in the hood of a long black cloak.

"Who goes there?" he laughed impishly.

Tino blinked. "Um, it's me—Tino," he said awkwardly.

"Welcome buddy," he snickered through the crack of the door and put on a spooky voice. "We've been expecting you." He shut the door briefly before opening it again. "You wait here, I'll get your..." he paused, like he was unsure what to say. "...*Henrik* for you." He closed it again.

Was everything okay in there? Why was he dressed like that? Was something going on? These were all questions that raced through Tino's mind as he waited for Mathias to come back. In the time they'd known each other, nothing like this had ever happened before...

A loud scream was heard from inside the house, and he compulsively felt the need to grab at the cross that hung around his neck. Tino took a step back, pushing his legs down into a defensive stance as the door opened.

He was relieved when he saw that it was just Henrik. He, unlike Mathias, wasn't wearing a black cloak, instead just wearing a plaid shirt and jeans, just like he usually did. It was almost *too* normal.

"Uh—hi," Henrik said shyly, a light pink blush dancing across his cheeks.

Tino's heart melted. He could take whatever weird bullshit was inside that house as long as it meant that he could see Henrik making that face.

"Hi!" Tino greeted cheerfully, waving at him and taking him by the arm. He leaned against his shoulder. "Are you ready?"

"Mm," Henrik hummed, his lips curled upwards in a miniscule smile.

They were about to leave when the door slammed open, and a small child burst out. His cloak was a deep burgundy, and he had two little fangs that just managed to peak out of his mouth. His hair, which was a dark brown, had two little strands that poked out of the top and fell on either side of his face. He grabbed Henrik's leg and held onto it tightly.

"No, don't go," he cried.

Tino's eyes widened and he took a step back.

"Uh—who's this?" Tino stuttered in awkward surprise.

Henrik let out a long, exasperated sigh as he let go of Tino and pulled the kid off his leg and picked him up, holding him at his hip.

"Mirza," he scolded, "I told you. I need to go now."

“But I want sweets! And I want to play!” he whined.

“Had enough sweets today,” Henrik said sternly. He walked back to the door and put him down at the front step, crouching down to meet his eyes. “Go back inside, it’s Mathias’ turn to watch you.”

“I don’t like him,” Mirza huffed, “I want you.”

“We can play again later,” Henrik said gently, patting him on the head. “But I have to go with Tino.” He stood.

Mirza puffed out his cheek as Tino once again took his arm.

“Why? Who is that?”

“Tino is—” Henrik hesitated, before looking over at him. It was a searching gaze, one that was looking to him to answer.

Was he supposed to have an answer? Hell if he knew what they were.

“What? Who is he?” Mirza asked again.

Tino felt himself sweating. “Uh—Henrik is my—uh”



“Tino’s my wife,” Henrik blurted out abruptly.

“What?!” Tino exclaimed, letting go of Henrik’s arm and jumping back several steps.

Did he really just *say* that? He couldn't comprehend it, his heart pounding against his chest as his face changed into one of shock and bewilderment. Henrik's eyes widened in realization, and his mouth fell open slightly, like he was trying to come up with something to say; to take back the words that had just left his lips moments ago. He was growing pinker by the second, stumbling and stuttering to a degree that he couldn't be understood at all.

"Oh!" Mirza exclaimed, "I get it!"

The front door swung open.

"There you are kiddo!" Mathias exclaimed happily, "Thanks for keepin' track of him, buddy." He stepped outside and scooped the kid up into his arms. "You guys have fun on your *date*," he said teasingly.

Henrik's face was the brightest red he'd ever seen on him, with his cheeks being softly dappled with color, while Tino was in such a state of disarray, he couldn't even react. Mathias gave a short little wave, and then disappeared inside.

"I'm sorry," Henrik immediately said in a panicked apology, "didn't mean to say that." He looked so flustered and embarrassed, Tino was almost surprised that his face could hold that much emotion, considering how stoic he usually was. It was very endearing.

Tino couldn't help himself from smiling before bursting into a loud laugh, patting Henrik's shoulder as it echoed through the cold winter air.

"Your wife, huh?"

"Sorry," Henrik apologized again.

"You're funny, you know that?" Tino said with a smile, letting his arm fall back into place around Henrik's.

"You think so?" he mumbled.

"Sure do!"

Henrik turned his head to the side as they started walking to the car, obviously trying to hide the blush that seemed to be growing ever deeper.

"So, who was that kid?" Tino asked.

"Lukas' friend, Valentin's little brother," Henrik answered.

"Really?" Tino laughed, "That's a bit..." he paused, trying to remember the word, "convoluted."

Henrik let out a little puff of air like he thought he was funny. "Mm."

"Do you take care of him often?"

"Whenever Valentin brings him," Henrik said.

"He seemed to like you a lot." Tino smiled. "Has anyone ever told you that you're good with kids?"

“No,” Henrik said quietly. He squeezed Tino’s arm and pulled him closer before releasing him, stopping as they reached Tino’s car at the curb.

His car was an old white CUV, one that had served him well in his time here. It was cheap but it got the job done, so he supposed that was all that really mattered. Sure, the radio never played and he could only play music through the aux cable, but he liked it that way! It wasn’t like he’d be listening to it much anyway. And yeah, maybe the fabric seats were a bit torn, but they’d been like that since he’d gotten it, and he didn’t really mind.

“Well I think so,” He said. He walked around the other side of his vehicle and they both stepped inside. Henrik only blushed a bit more in response.

“Why don’t you put on some music?” Tino suggested as he slid his key into the ignition.

Henrik gave him a bit of an apprehensive look before picking up the aux cable. “If you want...” Upbeat chords began to blast out of the speakers, which Tino quickly moved to turn down to a more normal volume. “Hope you don’t mind ABBA,” he mumbled.

Tino couldn’t help the warm affection that soaked his expression. Of course he would like this kind of music. For such a sweet and gentle man, it only made sense.

“Nope, I don’t mind at all,” Tino said with a smile. He pulled the car into drive and took off, heading towards their university.

The car ride wasn’t actually that long, only about fifteen minutes, but it didn’t escape Tino’s notice that Henrik was often clutching to the side of the door, almost like he was afraid of falling out or crashing. This confused him. He wasn’t driving any different than he usually did, though there were a few close calls with missing red lights and stop signs... Henrik looked *way* too relieved when they arrived, stepping out of the car as quickly as he possibly could. He mumbled something under his breath, though Tino couldn’t hear what it was, but it sounded like...a prayer? He’d never thought of him as the religious type.

He shrugged, clasping onto Henrik’s hand as soon as the two of them were out of the car.

“Come on,” Tino said, dragging him through the parking lot and to the entrance of the library, “I know just the place we can sit!” Henrik happily obliged.

The building was somewhat full but still comfortably quiet, the sounds of the room filled with the turning of book pages, soft voices, and subtle tapping of footsteps of people strolling down the aisles in search of this or that. The library looked the same as it always did, with luxurious stone columns and an overwhelming amount of natural light. He glanced at the overhang of the balcony, and the green carpets that lined the floor. But he wouldn’t drag Henrik up the stairs today, instead, he had something...more comfortable in mind. He felt at home in this place. It always felt like he was seeing it for the first time, even though he came here *way* more often than was actually necessary. He couldn’t help it! Sometimes, he just needed the quiet.

So what better to be with the most quiet person he knew in the most quiet building they could go to.

“Right here!” Tino exclaimed in a happy whisper, pulling him to a beanbag chair by the back. “I’ll be back in a bit, I’m gonna go grab the book we need.”

Henrik nodded, and awkwardly sat down in the chair, lightly fiddling with his fingers in what was probably nervousness. “Okay,” he said quietly.

As Tino had spent most of his junior year in this place, he knew exactly where he needed to go to pick up the book he was looking for. It only took him a couple of minutes to find it and pull it down from its spot on the shelf, though he could've done it faster if not for how high the librarians insisted on placing it.

"Got it!" Tino said happily, coming back to Henrik and cozying up next to him in the chair. The man next to him looked at him with widened eyes, jolting slightly before immediately settling back down and pulling him close. His embrace was warm, which was a welcome feeling to Tino considering how cold he always felt. He was very grateful for it; It felt nice to have someone who could keep him warm. Tino held the book—*The Great Gatsby*—out over his lap.

"It was really sweet of you to want to read with me," he said. He turned to look Henrik in the eyes. "Are you sure you're okay with it?" he asked.

He slowly nodded his head. "Mm," he grunted. His eyes flickered with unease, though it was something he was obviously trying to hide.

Tino put the book down and gently rested his hands over Henrik's. "You don't have to do this, you know."

"I want to," he replied.

"But something's bothering you."

Henrik shifted his gaze to the floor before letting his eyes meet Tino's again. "...Can I tell you somethin'?"

"Anything," Tino answered immediately.

He hesitated before he spoke, his expression softening as he looked deeply into Tino's eyes. "Don't like to read 'cause of somethin' that happened when I was young," he said. Tino pulled Henrik's head to lean against his chest as he continued to speak, sympathetically looking down at him as he held him close. "When I moved to America, I didn't know much English. On my first day of middle school, the teacher made me come to the front of the class. Told me to read. I couldn't do it." He let out a heavy sigh. "Mathias helped, told the teacher I didn't speak the language. But..." he closed his eyes softly, "Never picked a book up again after that."

"I'm sorry that happened," Tino said sympathetically.

"It's okay," Henrik said, looking up and meeting his eyes. "I want to make new memories now... with you."

Tino said nothing, only leaning forward and softly kissing him, not wanting to sully the atmosphere by opening his mouth and saying more than was necessary. It was a gesture that was appreciated, as Henrik leaned forward, pushing their foreheads together as soon as their lips had parted from each other.

He didn't know what it was like to have that happen; he'd become pretty proficient in English by the time he moved to America. But he knew the feeling; to be lost and confused, not understanding a single word of what anyone was saying around you. It was terrifying to be so out of your depth, like you suddenly found yourself drowning before ever realizing you were in the water. He wouldn't wish something like that on his worst enemy. Not even Ivan.

Henrik rested his head on Tino's chest as he pulled the book open to its first page.

"Ready?" he asked.

"Mm." Henrik muttered, a small smile sitting on his lips.

Tino opened the book, holding both sides of it open over their heads. "*In my younger and more vulnerable years my father gave me some advice that I've been turning over in my mind ever since.*" He began to read, whispering the words softly into Henrik's ear.

The other man moved closer to him, his eyes moving up to scan the pages of the book. Tino glanced down at him. Henrik nodded.

Neither of them were sure how much time had passed by the time they reached the halfway point of the book, but it's not like either of them minded. It was nice to feel Henrik leaning his weight against him as he rested his head on his chest. Tino felt trusted, and cared for in a way he wasn't sure he'd experienced before. Henrik was being so vulnerable, allowing him to show him something he'd been so afraid of. It was admirable, and Tino found himself wondering if there was a single other person that he'd be this open with.

"So..." Henrik sighed softly as he pointed to the open page of the book above him, "Nick loves Gatsby, right?"

Tino let out a quiet snicker, "You should wait to analyze until after you finish reading, but I like your enthusiasm."

"Aren't you supposed to make predictions as you go along?" Henrik asked as he turned to look up at Tino. "...That's what we always did in classes anyway..."

"You could, but I feel like you get a better view of the story once you get the whole picture." Tino closed the book and laid it down, letting it fall onto Henrik's torso as he moved one of his hands up to gently run his hand through his hair. "That's how I always liked to do it at least."

"You think so?"

"Mhmm," Tino hummed softly, "I always like to read a book twice, that way I can read it for the story, and the next time for analysis. I love finding all the little details the author leaves behind, it always makes the second readthrough exciting."

"Excitin'..." Henrik repeated thoughtfully. "Can't you get it the first time? When you make predictions ahead of time... You can find the big picture when you finish. See what you missed." He looked up at Tino with a playful smile. "Then you read it again, if you're Tino Väinämöinen."

Tino matched his expression with his own sly little grin. "I *never* miss," he said.

Henrik's face screwed up slightly, and he laughed. He actually laughed. It was deep and billowy, and he sat up from his spot on Tino's chest to support himself. It was beautiful.

He was beautiful.

A loud shushing sound was heard from across the library, obviously signaling him to be quiet. He covered his mouth as he continued to snicker, hiding his beautiful smile with the back of his hand. "I love you, Tino," he said.

He said that he loved him.

Loved.

Tino sat up, his heart pounding in his chest as they apprehensively met each other's eyes.

“You do?” Tino said, almost breathless.

“Yes,” Henrik said without hesitation.

There was a brief silence.

Tino felt his brain sparking in his skull, unable to come up with any words to answer him. Henrik really liked him that much. Henrik wanted to *be* with him that much. He'd never had someone say something like that before. Well, someone that actually meant it like that anyway. Tino's mouth opened but found that, for once he had no words to speak. There wasn't some awkward monologue ready to be forced out, only the empty thoughts of a man unsure of what to say. He knew he wasn't much good with words, and that even if he was able to reply it wouldn't be the straight and solid answer Henrik would need. He had a tendency to overthink things sometimes.

“...Is that okay?” Henrik asked, hesitation seeping through his tone.

But Tino couldn't answer him with words, and did so in the only way that would be truly clear. He leaned forward, grasped onto his hands and kissed him. They let go of each other only to bring themselves closer, fingers carding through locks of hair until they broke to take a breath. There was nothing more, only the chaste innocence of a kiss that could speak all the words Tino could not. Because when he had said that he loved him. He meant it.



“I love you,” Henrik said again.

“I love you too.” Tino finally replied.

There had been times when he said those words when he hadn’t meant it. It wasn’t deceit if both parties knew it wasn’t true. But this was different. There were no more lies, only the honesty of someone who cared about him enough to say those words and mean it.

Henrik squeezed their hands, not saying anything more as his eyes crinkled in that happy little smile he seemed to be making a lot lately. They were soft, he was softer. His kind, considerate and gentle personality was hidden behind a mask he hardly looked beyond. Maybe Henrik looked so intimidating because he wasn’t allowed to be anything different. His gaze hardened after hardship and had never been able to soften again. Until now, at least. How much weight did he hold on his back? And how long would he wait before he felt he could share his burden?

Tino reached forward and placed a soft kiss against his cheek. “I love you, Henrik.”

They hugged each other tightly, leaning back and falling into the beanbag chair again. Henrik’s arms were wrapped around Tino’s waist, holding so tightly it was almost like he was afraid to let go. They found the book again, holding it over their heads as Tino rested his head against Henrik’s chest.

“*Chapter—*” Tino began to say before Henrik looked down to cut him off.

“It’s okay,” he muttered quietly, “I’d like to try to read it on my own now.”

“Alright,” Tino said, smiling at him. “Just go at your own pace.”

They stayed that way until they finished the book, which wasn’t actually a very long time considering how short it was. However, the sun had long since set, and the library was now almost completely empty save for a few students that were studying near the back. The only light came from a few lamps, placed on top of work desks for students to use.

“So,” Tino hummed, closing the book and putting it aside, “How was it?”

“That wasn’t so bad,” Henrik mumbled, more to himself than to Tino.

“What wasn’t?” Tino asked.

“Readin’,” he clarified. “I put it off for so long, but it wasn’t bad. I used to get shake-y, but I feel fine now.”

“That’s wonderful!” Tino said happily, “Maybe that means you’ll get yourself a new hobby!”

Henrik huffed in laughter. “Hm, maybe.”

“So, what did you think of the book? Did you like it?” Tino asked.

“It was good.” Henrik said.

“Oh! I’m glad you think so!” Tino said, smiling. “Usually people brush it off and say it’s boring, but all the interesting stuff is happening while Nick isn’t looking! It’s all about picking up on little details and piecing what’s actually happening together—seeing through his lies, you know? And even if Gatsby’s kind of a try-hard, you almost want to root for him, don’t you? Even though you know his love for Daisy is absolutely hopeless and that he’d never have a chance with her.”

Henrik readjusted, sitting up in what must've been an attempt to get more comfortable. "You think so?" he asked.

"Oh yeah," Tino said, nodding his head and joining him in sitting up. "Firstly, she was already married. She wasn't very happy, but she still had a husband and daughter, and it wouldn't be right to split up a family like that. Not to mention how Gatsby made his money. Even if he wasn't involved in all that stuff, he'd still make a terrible partner. He idolized Daisy to a ridiculous amount. You can't love someone if you treat them like that! Lovers are supposed to be equals, so nothing would ever work out if one saw the other as so much better. Daisy would fall short of Gatsby's expectations, because he built her up as perfect for so long. But also, he would believe that everything wrong with their relationship was his fault, because Daisy could never be wrong. She's perfect, so *he* must be the reason why things weren't working. You can tell how much he cares for her by saying that he was the one who killed Myrtle. Gatsby would do anything for Daisy, even though she wouldn't return the favor."

"...Oh," Henrik mumbled.

Tino laughed awkwardly and fiddled with his fingers, silently wondering if he'd said too much and made things weird. He cleared his throat. "Anyway, I really like that book."

"I can tell." Henrik said, chuckling a little.

Tino stood up, "Well, we should probably leave now. It's gotten pretty dark."

"Um—yeah," Henrik mumbled as he stood, "'course."

"Do you know what time it is?" Tino asked, holding his hand out for Henrik to grab it.

He only hesitated for a second or two before he took hold. "Um," Henrik muttered before checking his phone. "1:35"

Tino paused, his body becoming stiff. "...Can you repeat that?"

"... 1:35," Henrik said, more awkwardly this time.

"Holy shit!" Tino exclaimed loudly, "It's one in the morning!" His outburst was meant by a resounding 'hush' from all the other students still studying. Tino slapped a hand over his mouth, attempting to quiet himself even after the words had left his lips. Henrik huffed a small laugh, before also putting his hand over his mouth in a sign of solidarity.

"Uh," Tino said, unsure of what to say or do. He couldn't bring Henrik back to Lukas' house now, it was *far* too late. Sure, it was only 15 minutes away but he didn't want to disturb them at such a late hour. Their house was in a strange state too, and Tino wasn't sure how much he wanted to be over there, considering all the dark cloaks, drawn windows, and mysterious things he wasn't sure he could explain. He wasn't too interested in finding out what exactly was going on over there so late at night.

"Do you wanna come to my house?" Tino whispered urgently. "You can sleep over and I'll drive you back here tomorrow for—."

Henrik didn't seem to need any sort of justification, as he interrupted him. "Mm," he said. He squeezed their entwined palms. "Leavin' now then?"

Tino nodded, and together they left the library, stepping out into the cold.

Tino certainly wasn't what he expected him to be.

"This is my favorite song!" Tino yelled excitedly as heavy metal blasted out of the speakers of his car. "Don't you like it?!" He was bouncing excitedly in his seat, leaning his foot down against the gas pedal and making them go at a speed that was *far* beyond the legal limit.

Henrik gripped tightly to the handle on the side of the door, praying that if there were any gods above him, that they'd keep him safe until they arrived at Tino's house. "Um—yeah," he muttered.

"Metallica is the *best*!" He pulled the wheel, making the car swerve intensely as they barely avoided hitting the sidewalk.

"Mm," Henrik said, though he doubted that Tino heard him. The music was so intensely loud that the base was shaking the entire car. Henrik was somewhat surprised that the police hadn't been called on them yet, considering how much of a menace Tino was on the road. He gripped harder on the car door, and put his other hand underneath the dashboard to steady himself.

Despite it all though, he loved Tino with all his heart. Because he was just... incredible. Who else would treat him so kindly? He'd never met anyone outside his immediate friend group that treated him so nicely. It didn't help that he was probably the most beautiful man he had ever met, and the only one who could make his heart stutter in a way he hadn't experienced before. Tino was a lot more confident than he was, he was unafraid to be himself and proud of who he was. He wore his heart on his sleeve, and despite everything the world had thrown at him he was still so happy. Henrik admired him for that. It takes strength to be happy, despite misfortune.

"We're almost there," Tino shouted over the music. He leaned forward and pressed harder on the accelerator.

Henrik could only wonder what Tino's home would be like. He'd said he had roommates...What would they be like? He'd met them very briefly, but hardly long enough to really remember who they were. He hoped they wouldn't be too judgemental, Henrik knew he wasn't the best at communicating his intentions. All he wanted was to be happy with Tino, but was that something they'd understand? Would they be okay with the two of them being together? He was getting ahead of himself, he and Tino weren't even dating. Or, were they? Henrik didn't know. They'd kissed and said that they loved each other but did that mean anything on a deeper level? He was okay with just being casual, hell, he'd be okay with anything Tino wanted them to do. Henrik didn't have much experience with these types of relationships anyway. Tino *definitely* knew what they were, because the only thing Henrik was sure of was that he was confused.

"Hey," Tino shouted tensely over the music, "don't touch that!"

Henrik looked down at the glove box, which had creaked open slightly.

"Close it!"

He did as he was told.

"Sorry," Henrik immediately apologized as he began fiddling with the bottom of his shirt.

Tino took his eyes off the road for a moment, studying the glove box with an unreadable expression on his face.

“Uh—” Henrik began to say, but he didn’t get to finish his thought, as Tino slammed on the brakes of the car.

It came to a launching halt, and Henrik probably would’ve flown through the windshield had it not been for the seatbelt he was wearing.

“Don’t worry about it,” Tino said almost too quickly, slamming the car into park and pulling out his keys. “We’re here.”

Funny, Henrik hadn’t even noticed they’d entered a neighborhood.

“Come on, come on,” Tino said, “Let’s get inside.”

Henrik definitely wouldn’t be one to argue. Never again would he allow Tino to drive him *anywhere*. Hopefully, he’d let him be the one to drive them to campus tomorrow.

The two of them stepped out of the car, and Henrik was greeted with a beautiful sight. The house they were parked in front of was absolutely *drenched* in hundreds of twinkling Christmas lights. Every square inch of the building had some kind of decoration, whether that be wreaths or tinsel. The backyard was dotted with Christmas elf statues and light-up reindeer displays. Tino’s motorcycle was parked in the driveway, along with another car. It was a dark green second-hand minivan, and it probably belonged to one of Tino’s roommates. Disregarding that though, everything else in the yard looked to be practically new, like every single ornament, light, and statue had come from the store only yesterday. Whoever decorated this house must’ve taken amazing care of it.

“...Very festive,” Henrik said as he stared out into the yard.

“Oh, yeah,” Tino said with an awkward smile. “I kind of have a bad habit of going all out for Christmas, so I hope you don’t mind.” He reached out for his hand, and Henrik immediately took it. They stood for a minute, looking over the beautiful atmosphere.

“No,” Henrik muttered, “I don’t.”

The air was cold as they took it in, their breaths coming out in soft clouds; Henrik didn’t mind, and it seemed that Tino didn’t either, not even bothering to zip up his jacket as they stood together. Their eyes traced the roof of the house, going over every shining light until they eventually found themselves looking up at the stars above them. Each and every one twinkled against the harsh darkness of the night. The imaginary lines connected, forming countless constellations all around them. He could see them now, clearer than he’d seen them in years.

“Tino,” he said breathlessly, “the stars...”

They were so wonderful he almost couldn’t look away. His eyes softened as they fell against the darkness, remembering all those sleepless nights in his childhood. When he’d get so lost in the sky that he’d forget he had to sleep until he saw the beginning of the sun rise. It was an effortless splendor. Each star was millions of lightyears away, many having died a long time ago. But they still dotted the sky, still there to be admired for their beauty. The wonderful thing about the stars was that they were all a part of the same sky, so no matter where in the world he was, the night would hold him just the same.

Tino turned to face him. “Hm? What about them?”

The winter wind blew sharply in his face, tearing at them, but neither moved.

“Are you an astrology fan or something?” he teased, squeezing his hand.

Henrik acted solely on instinct, grabbing hold of Tino’s waist and hoisting him up into the air. He held him up as high as he could, wondering to himself if there was some way he could immortalize his loveliness in the sky above him. But as he held him there, Henrik’s eyes never drifted from Tino’s face; Watching the way he laughed as he was held so high above the ground.

“Hey! What are you doing?” Tino giggled, looking a bit embarrassed as their eyes met.

And Henrik smiled, because those old stars were nothing compared to his beauty.

“Nothin’,” he said.

Tino cupped his hands around Henrik’s face and smiled at him, hooded, downturned eyes crinkling upwards as he snickered. He kissed him. “I love you.”

A part of Henrik’s mind could hardly believe that he was saying those words, much less that he actually meant it. But all of that was pushed to the back of his mind, as Tino looked down on him.

“Love you too,” Henrik said.

Tino smiled and kissed his forehead again before letting himself down and taking his hands in his own.

“Come on,” he said softly, pulling him towards the front door. “Let’s get inside.”

And Henrik gladly followed him.

The interior of Tino’s house was as intensely decorated as the outside, with every doorway being lined with tinsel and every surface having adorable little (unlit) christmas candles on top. To the side of the doorway was a coat rack, with Tino’s leather jacket and a couple others he didn’t recognize. Unfortunately though, he couldn’t see much else as it was so dark. He would’ve turned on the lights if he knew where the switch was, but Tino seemed completely unfazed by the darkness. The house was quiet as they crept through it, walking through the entry room. They passed a staircase, and though Tino seemed like he had initially wanted to go up it, he stopped suddenly and poked his head around the corner of a wall.

“Christ,” He muttered, straightening his posture.

Because there were two of his roommates. One of them—the one with shoulder length brown hair—was passed out and laying on the kitchen counter, loosely holding a bottle of vodka as he dangled his arm off the side. And the other one—the one with the glasses—was drunkenly rambling to him, like he could listen.

“And that’s another thing! When you talk like that it hurts me—” he hiccuped, “We should be...” it seemed he couldn’t remember the words.

“How much did you *have*?!” Tino asked, rushing to his side.

“None,” he hiccuped.

“Jesus,” Tino said, “let me get you to your room.”

“No,” his roommate whined, “I don’t—” he hiccuped again, “I’m not—drunk.”

“Yes you are,” Tino said, putting his hands on his shoulders. “Here,” he said, pushing his roommate to rest against the counter. “Give me a second.” He walked to the other side of the counter, and went to pick up the other person. As this man was tall and thin, he must’ve been very easy to carry—because even though he was only a couple inches shy of Henrik’s own height—Tino quite easily picked him up and pushed him over one of his shoulders.

He really liked that Tino was strong. It had certainly been a surprise but...not one that he would complain about. Maybe one day Tino would lift *him* around, carrying him in his arms and looking down on him with that beautiful little smile... His face felt hot and he cleared his throat. He could’ve let himself be carried away by those embarrassing thoughts if it hadn’t been for the softly approaching footsteps that came from the door.

“Tino,” came the voice, “Welcome home.”

Henrik turned to face him.

It was Raivis.

He looked practically the same as when he had last seen him. Dirty blond hair with dull cerulean eyes. Except this time, he was tightly clutching a nearly empty bottle of vodka in his fist.

“Hey, Raivis,” Tino greeted him nonchalantly.

Raivis didn’t even question the fact that Tino had one of his roommates slung over his shoulder. Was this a common occurrence?

“I’ll be back in a minute,” Tino said, taking his spectacled roommate by the hand and leading him out of the room. “I need to put these two to bed.”

And before Henrik could protest, Tino had already disappeared out of the room.

Okay.

He looked down and met the eyes of the tiny man before him. They were large and owl-like as he stared. And even though he was at *least* a full foot taller than him, he still felt somewhat...intimidated?

“...So you’re the fire tamer?” Raivis mumbled.

Henrik looked around the room briefly before meeting his eyes again. Clearly, he was the only one there. He gave a confused little nod, willing to humor him. Maybe he had something interesting to say.

Raivis approached him, and Henrik felt the compulsive need to take a step back. He resisted it.

“I think that’s funny,” Raivis began again, “You learned your lesson though.” Lifting his hand he dragged his finger across his own forehead in the exact spot Henrik had gotten his scar. “Nice to meet you, stranger,” he said.

“...You too,” Henrik replied, feeling a little uneasy.

Raivis brought the bottle of vodka to his lips, finishing off the remaining liquid and wiping his mouth with his forearm. He didn’t flinch from what Henrik knew would be a burning, rubbery sensation.

Had he had that entire bottle? It seemed so...

Despite that, he didn't look or sound drunk at all.

"Um. I'm Henrik," he said.

"I know who you are," Raivis replied casually, not taking his eyes off him as he put the empty bottle on the counter and reached for a new, full one. "You may call me Raivis," he said.

"...Nice to meet you," Henrik said, though he wasn't sure he meant it.

Raivis unscrewed the cap of his new bottle, taking in several more long gulps of the clear liquid.

He'd seen Mathias drink heavily, but that was mostly beer or akvavit—and he was easily affected by it. Lukas, like Mathias, drank those too, but he wasn't a stranger to vodka as well. He was still affected by it to some extent and could hold his liquor if he wanted to. But he'd also seen him black out drunk before. If he was ever like that—it was because he wanted to be. Raivis, on the other hand, was drinking straight vodka, unflinchingly taking it down.

For the sake of his liver, he could only *hope* that he had just started, though his gut told him the opposite.

"What's it like to hold someone's heart?" he asked, his eyes half shut as he stared at the floor.

Was he asking about Tino? Henrik glanced to the exit of the room. It seemed that he wasn't going to be coming back anytime soon.

"Um," Henrik mumbled. "...It's nice," he decided to say.

Raivis took positively to the answer, straightening his back as he gave an almost lovelorn smile. "Ah, such is the beauty of love..." he brought the bottle to his lips and drank from it again. "Please cherish it. Many things aren't built to last..."

Henrik furrowed his eyebrows. Just what was he trying to imply?

"If you're talkin' about Tino, I love him," Henrik said.

"Of course, of course," Raivis said with a dismissive wave of his hand. His eyes became almost misty, "I just worry for you is all..."

"Worry?" Henrik repeated.

Raivis' gaze met his with an almost intimidating amount of intensity. "What will you do when it's gone?" he asked.

Henrik said nothing, his lips falling into a hard line. He wasn't making any sense. Maybe he *was* drunk and all his poetic words were actually just the ramblings of someone who had way too much to drink.

Raivis rolled his eyes, clearly a little annoyed. "Don't let yourself be incinerated by his blaze, or you'll have more to worry about than a scar." When Henrik didn't answer right away he sighed again. "Just be careful," he muttered, "Don't lose yourself to mindless passion."

“Oh...” Henrik said quietly. He could do nothing else, their eyes unable to be torn away from each other as they stared.

“Good to see that you two are getting along!”

Tino’s voice came from the entryway to the kitchen. “Sorry that took so long,” he laughed. “Eduard was being kind of difficult.”

Raivis peeled back and joined Tino at his side.

“I like him,” Raivis said.

Henrik was terribly surprised by that. He hadn’t gotten that impression at all. Then again, Raivis was rather hard to read. Though...he supposed he was too. They were similar in that way at least.

Tino laughed a little and gently patted Raivis’ head. “Please don’t tell me—were you trying to freak him out?”

Raivis gave a playful little smile as he leaned into the touch. “...Maybe.”

“Well cut it out. You’re gonna scare him off.”

Raivis smiled a little, closing his eyes as Tino ran his hand through his hair with a pleased expression on his face. It remained there until Tino removed his hand.

“Alright,” Tino said with a soft sigh, “Let’s get to bed, hm?”

Henrik nodded.

Tino reached forward and took Henrik’s hand in his own, dragging him out of the room before waving briefly to Raivis.

“Goodnight, Raivis,” Tino said as he left.

He didn’t say anything in return, his deep blue eyes remaining on Henrik until he was out of sight.

That guy was...something else.

Tino led Henrik back around the corner, passing the living room—which was very impressively decorated with a large christmas tree and crookedly embroidered stockings—to the staircase. The railings, Henrik noted, had twinkling white lights wrapped around them.

“Sorry about him,” Tino said, looking over his shoulder as they climbed up the stairs.

Henrik shrugged a little. “Don’t mind. He seems...” He couldn’t quite think of the word. “...Nice.”

Tino nodded. “He’s just...” He paused, like he too was trying to come up with a way to describe him. “He’s just trying to protect us from ‘affairs of the heart’ as he would say.” He chuckled as they reached the top, stopping outside of the first room—which probably meant it was his. “Don’t take anything he says too seriously.”

“Right...” Henrik said.

Tino yawned a little and opened the door. “Hurry up and get inside,” he said, smiling lightly. “I’m tired.”

Tino's room was...not what he expected.

Then again, he wasn't sure *what* he expected of him anymore.

There were the normal things, like a desk covered in school papers, framed pictures, and a miniature Christmas tree, as well as a bookshelf that held large, thick novels in both English and Finnish—there were even posters depicting what must've been his favorite rock and metal bands—but there was one thing that made Henrik come to a complete halt. In the center of the back wall, right above his queen sized bed with light blue sheets, was a large, wooden hanging display that held what looked to be an antique rifle. He couldn't even think of anything to say, too busy staring up at it in shock.

Tino liked guns?

He seemed to take note of his expression and quickly got to explaining. "Oh that?" Tino laughed, "Don't worry, that was my grandfather's—during the war. It's just an old antique, he let me take it with me for good luck! He said it saved his life back then." Tino said that like it was normal.

Other than that though, the room looked a bit bare, like he—for some reason—hadn't really allowed himself to move in completely. His closet was on the far right of the room, next to which was a large dresser, where a rosary, a picture frame, and a necklace were sitting. The rosary looked like it was very well loved, with dark blue beads that were probably beautiful a couple of years ago, but by now more dull and smudged. The picture frame was filled with a photo of an older man, kneeling and hugging a young looking Tino from behind. They were both smiling brightly, laughing for the camera as the snow fell around them. He looked a lot like Tino, only visibly older, with deep smile lines and crow's feet. The man was wearing a jacket identical to the one that seemed to be inseparable from Tino's frame. Finally, there was a silver necklace. It shone brightly, its metal seeming to not have been touched for years. At the end of the chain, was a four sided silver badge design. It had the profile of a Roman soldier with a background of fire behind him. It had a couple of Finnish words written on the bottom, and the only thing Henrik could read was the word 'Florian' which he assumed was his name. Of course Tino would have some items like this, he was Christian after all, though of what denomination he wasn't sure. Most of the people from the Nordic region were Lutheran, so perhaps that was what he was.

Tino seemed to notice what he was looking at and pulled at the collar of his jacket, clearing his throat.

"Um," Henrik stuttered, suddenly feeling a bit awkward, "Is this...?"

"Yeah," Tino said with a nod of his head. "That's my dad."

There was silence, but only for a moment.

"...He gave me that." Tino said, gesturing to the necklace on the dresser. "I've never worn it though." Henrik blinked at him, and he continued. "Uh—you know, wouldn't want to get it dirty... It was expensive." He plunged his hands into his pockets for a moment before taking one out and scratching the back of his neck with it. "...Anyway," he laughed with a forced little chortle and turned to pick up a different photograph.



"This is my grandfather," he said, handing the photo to Henrik. *"The one who was in the war."*

It was a cute photo, Tino looked at least five years younger and was standing with an older man. Tino's smile looked bright, as his grandfather held a tight palm on his shoulder. This man's hair was a stark silver and was completely slicked back, save for a piece that had fallen out of place on the left side. His skin was heavily wrinkled and he had a small mustache and beard. Even in the picture, he didn't smile.

He and Tino looked practically nothing alike.

Well, they had one thing in common.

Those beautiful lilac eyes. It seemed that they ran in the family.

There was another photograph close to where that one had been. It was in black and white, depicting what must've been his grandfather when he was young. He looked like he couldn't have been older than 20, and had a white scarf wrapped tightly around his neck and a black ushanka. But even though the photo was in black and white, he could still see that piercing shade of purple.

"You look young..." Henrik said, referring to the photo that Tino was currently showing him.

Tino laughed a little and reached forward, gently taking it back from him. "I think that picture was taken..." he paused, as if he was trying to remember, "...hm...well my dad was alive... Ah!" he suddenly exclaimed, "Seven years ago—it was taken seven years ago."

Tino had been fifteen.

"...You were a cute kid," Henrik said shyly, looking up to the beautiful man before him.

"Oh stop," Tino chuckled, coming over to stand next to him. "I bet you were too."

"Mm."

A light blush fell over his face, as Tino took his hand, and Henrik didn't hesitate this time, kissing the top of his forehead. It seemed Tino enjoyed the affection, because he smiled and came closer, hugging him tightly.

"Okay, now let's get to bed, please? I don't know about you, but I'm exhausted."

Henrik couldn't have agreed more.

Tino strode over to the closet, casually stripping himself of his jacket and placing it neatly on a nearby dresser. The shirt he took off less gently, yanking and pulling at it before discarding it into a laundry basket. He then proceeded to bend over, in front of a set of drawers, probably looking for some sleep clothes.

It was embarrassing how flustered Henrik got from the sight of him. He really hadn't gotten the chance to see how muscular Tino really was, with robust arms and a lean body that could make any man dizzy—especially him. He really shouldn't have been surprised—he had trained as a firefighter after all...He could hardly believe that his clothes hid his body so well. He doubted that it was something he did out of insecurity—as he seemed to have no qualms with stripping right in front of him. Perhaps he just liked loose clothing.

Tino reached his arms deeper into the closet, past an inconspicuous black box as he pulled out a...snowman themed onesie.

A warm feeling overtook his senses.

It seemed that every moment he was with him, he felt like he was falling more and more in love with him.

Would he *ever* figure him out?

He couldn't tear his eyes away from him. He was just too captivating—too breathtaking...

...Was that weird? Should he have been looking at all?

He couldn't look at him, not when he hadn't been given that kind of permission. It would be rude of him. He quickly turned away, looking to face the opposite wall.

"...What?" came Tino's confused voice. "Is something wrong?"

Henrik didn't turn around.

He couldn't. He'd hate to make him uncomfortable.

Tino appeared before him—now fully clothed—and laughed when he saw his face. "What are you so embarrassed about?"

"Uh—" Henrik stuttered, "nothin'."

"You can look at me...I promise I don't mind."

Henrik swallowed, his throat suddenly feeling very dry as his eyes met Tino's.

He gestured with a dismissive wave of his hand. "You know, cause we've already seen each other naked and all."

Right. That.

Henrik nodded weakly. "Just...don't want to make you uncomfortable."

Tino smiled again and softly kissed his cheek before falling back on his heels.

"Christ, were you this bad to everyone in gym locker rooms or am I just special?" he teased.

He didn't even have to consider that statement. The answer was just too easy.

"Just you."

Tino took a bit of a step back, meeting his eyes with surprise. "Oh."

Henrik felt his shoulders fall, and he slouched, looking up into Tino's eyes.

"Sorry," he mumbled, "is that weird?"

"No! No!" Tino frantically reassured him. The confidence from before had left him in a flash, and he was once again blushed in red and slightly awkward. "Not at all! I just didn't expect you to say that!" Tino clasped Henrik's hands tightly. Perhaps he didn't notice, but Tino's accent always came out stronger when he was feeling anxious.

Henrik figured he was right. Most people would expect a twenty-one year old guy to feel attraction to people more often. It's not that he didn't want to, he did. Especially after how much Mathias had teased him for it. But it was just something he had never experienced. He'd always just found other things to occupy his time, like wood carving or design.

Until he met Tino that is.

He squeezed his hands tighter, and they stood quietly for a while, doing nothing as they stared into each other's eyes. He probably could've stayed like that for hours—losing himself to those beautiful pools of lilac that he admired so much. In that moment, there wasn't anything that needed to be said, because it seemed that Tino—somehow—completely understood. Perhaps the feeling hit him close to home.

Tino blushed and looked away. "Right—um..." He broke their hands apart as he went to scratch the back of his neck. "Do you need something to change into?"

Henrik felt his face heat again. He hadn't thought about that. Sleeping over at Tino's house would mean that he'd need new clothes to sleep in...and he didn't have any of those. He hadn't thought of that when Tino invited him over to his house. He'd been too busy impulsively saying 'yes'. What was he going to do? He couldn't stop himself from fretting about it.

"It's really no trouble," Tino said. "I'm sure I have *something* that will fit you—if you'd like that, that is."

Henrik turned his head to the side—embarrassed that he'd let this happen. "Um—yeah," he mumbled, "that'd be good."

"Okay," Tino said, "let me see if I can find something for you." He walked over to the closet and started digging inside.

Of course, Tino's clothes probably wouldn't fit him. But it was still very sweet of him to offer.

"Go sit down on the bed," he instructed, "I'll bring something for you."

Henrik obliged, going over to it and awkwardly sitting down—knotting his hands together as he waited.

Looking around the room, it would've been very easy to assume that Tino was a completely different person. With posters depicting various heavy metal bands covering every wall, and the Christmas lights that were strung around, shining a brilliant white. There were also many pictures that hung throughout the space, each one depicting Tino standing with various people. They all looked very similar to him, leading Henrik to assume that they must be his family.

He seemed to care about them a lot.

...So why did he leave?

And though the memory was hazy, his mind wandered back to the drinking game they had been playing. When Tino had been asked why he left Finland, he immediately took his shot.

...Was there something he was hiding?

"Here," Tino said, handing him a shirt and a pair of black pajama pants. "I'm not sure if these will fit, but they're nice and loose on me, so—"

“Thanks,” he said, still embarrassed that he had to ask in the first place. It was just too easy to say ‘yes’ to Tino—how could he have refused the offer to come to his house? Especially when the alternative was being in Lukas’. That place just held too many bad memories.

He looked down at the shirt in his hands—which was a blue and white...hockey jersey? He lifted it up and turned it, blushing a little as he read the name across the back.

Väinämöinen.

“Back in Finland, I used to be on a team.” He smiled, seeming to reminisce. “Well...before...” He cut himself off. “—Anyway, I think it’ll be a comfortable fit for you.”

Henrik stared at him, his eyes falling down for a moment. There were so many things about him that completely shattered his initial perception. It’s not that he thought he’d be quiet and sweet all the time—because he was those things sometimes. Rather it was something else. He really hadn’t expected him to be this...boisterous.

Part of him wondered if he was too mundane for him. Tino liked things that were loud and exciting—he was outgoing, tough, and determined. And Henrik was...not that. He was subdued—gentle—someone who enjoyed the simpler things. He liked embroidery, sewing, and carpentry—hardly the most excitable hobbies. He liked soft music and puzzles—while Tino would probably much rather blow his speakers out listening to music that was already far too loud.

It wasn’t that it was a bad thing of course.

He just hoped he wouldn’t be too boring for him.

Tino studied him for a moment, seeming to take in his expression before he gasped a little and turned around. “Oh! I’m sorry! I won’t look at you when you change!”

Henrik chuckled a little under his breath. Tino would certainly never be boring to him.

He slid his shirt off, and tugged on the jersey. It smelled just like him—like roasted chestnuts and sugar. He sighed in content. He was wonderful. But while the shirt fit him well enough, the pants were something else entirely. Because Henrik was much taller than the other man was, they didn’t fit right, feeling tight and a little uncomfortable. Still though, he wouldn’t bother Tino with asking him for another pair. He didn’t want to burden him.

He cleared his throat, and Tino turned to look at him.

“Are those ok?” he asked.

“Mm.”

“Oh good,” Tino said with an awkward laugh. “Anyway, you’ll be okay here?”

Henrik blinked, confused by the question.

“You know—like—sleeping here? Or would you rather sleep somewhere else? There’s a guest room down the hall, if you’d like to sleep there instead.”

Oh.

Oh. Was Tino inviting him to share a bed with him? He flushed, shaking his head “Fine, this way.” Henrik mumbled.

Tino gave him a little kiss on the cheek, before breaking away to click off the overhead lights. He went to turn off the Christmas lights too, but Henrik shook his head and Tino kept them on. They climbed into bed together, embracing each other in their arms. The blankets were very warm and Tino didn’t feel as cold as he used to.

“Goodnight.” Tino said softly, brushing a hand against his cheek.

“Goodnight.” Henrik returned. He settled up against him, wrapping his arms around his waist and tangling their legs together under the blankets. Resting his head against his chest, he looked up, once again needing confirmation that he was actually holding Tino like this and that it wasn’t a dream.

And in a sudden burst of affection, he couldn't stop himself from saying the words.

“Love you.”

Tino snickered a little and hugged him closer. “Love you too...” he paused for a moment, “*kulta*.”

Henrik knew what that word meant. It was a Finnish term of endearment that meant ‘gold’—one that he’d read about on that night at the hospital. Did he really mean that? Perhaps he should’ve asked, but that would be too embarrassing. So, he pretended he had no idea what that meant, and closed his eyes, attempting to sleep despite his rapidly beating heart.

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes



“Come here, come here!” Tino said, joyfully waving to Henrik from the middle of the ice rink. “I promise, it’s not *so* bad!”

Henrik looked down apprehensively at the skates on his feet, gripping to the dividing wall. Tino had insisted they come here in the morning, so he could show him his ‘incredible ice skating skills’. Of course he had happily agreed. There were going to be things that would happen this afternoon—things that would significantly alter how he was to live for the foreseeable future. Everything had played out all too perfectly, and he just knew that something bad was on the horizon; something that he should have been worried about since the start of the weekend.

The apartment.

He knew it was probably in ruins. So where would he go? He couldn’t bring himself to keep staying at Lukas’ house. He wouldn’t stay there again if he could help it, and it’s not like he could just show up at his parents house, that bridge was long burned. But it’s not like he knew anyone else well enough to ask to stay with them while he figured things out. He’d need to find a new roommate.

Hopefully, this search would go better than the last...

He blinked his eyes a couple of times, bringing himself back to the present as he watched Tino soar around the rink. They were lucky that they’d come early in the morning, because even though it was one of the biggest rinks Henrik had ever seen, it was completely empty. The ice was fresh, with hardly any markings on it (save for ones that Tino had just recently put in.) The rink itself was in a large circle, with short walls that went around it and bleachers on the left side. Obviously, no one sat there.

Tino was wearing a new jacket—one from his time on his hockey team. It was blue with a white stripe where Finnish text was written. Though, it was to be noted that he wasn’t without his father’s jacket, as he had brought it in the car with them. Henrik would be surprised if Tino went anywhere without it, not that he could blame him.

He could push aside his complicated feelings about his living situation for now. Worrying about it now would do nothing but stress him out, and he’d had enough of that in the past few days. All Henrik wanted was to settle down and to enjoy his time with Tino, wherever that may lead him.

He could probably watch that beautiful man skate for hours. But he didn’t think he’d ask him to skate *with* him.

Henrik pulled at the sleeves of the old hockey jersey, bringing them down against his arms as he looked back up to Tino. The other man was gliding effortlessly around the rink, his straw blond hair whipping around his eyes as he began to build up speed. He moved so smoothly, like it was something he was born already knowing how to do. Tino held his hands to his sides, and was slightly crouched as his skates slid through the ice. That sight alone had made the trip worth it. Tino looked so confident and in his element here.

“Come on,” Tino urged again, sliding up to him and putting one hand against the half-wall, “it’ll be fun, I promise!”

Henrik wasn’t so sure it would be, in all honesty he could probably just stand and watch Tino skate for hours. But that wasn’t what they came here for. And if Tino asked him to do something, he would oblige. You have to get out of your comfort zone sometimes, right? Though he supposed he’d been out of it ever since he first saw Tino.

“If you say so,” Henrik mumbled. He loosened his grip and slowly slid a skated foot forward. The ice was slick against his weight, and feeling himself slipping, Henrik retreated back to the safety of the wall. For a second, he doubted he’d ever be able to let go of it again, but he quickly shook himself of that thought. There was no way he’d *ever* be able to skate like Tino could. Because Tino was light on his feet and nimble, being able to slide around on the ice like it was almost a second nature. And Henrik was...the opposite of that. He had to wonder what Mathias, Lukas, and Emil would say if they saw him like this. Clearly, ice skating wasn’t his strong suit.

“Do you need help?” Tino asked, moving closer to him.

Desperately. Henrik nodded.

“You got it,” Tino said, his eyes fondly meeting his own. “Can you give me your hands?”

Henrik lifted one off the wall and interlocked it with Tino’s.



And even though his skin was usually very cold—as they stood together in the freezing ice rink—his hands felt warm.

“I need the other one too,” he teased.

But Henrik wouldn't so easily hand that one over. It was now the only thing that was supporting his weight as he heavily leaned against the wall. He gripped against it harder, trying his best not to fall as he straightened his back. He didn't want to fall. He couldn't allow himself to. He didn't want to embarrass himself in front of Tino.

“You know, you don't have to skate if you don't want to,” Tino said with a slight frown. “I just thought it'd be something fun we could do before our classes, but we can go back to campus if you want.”

Henrik shook his head.

He didn't like to see Tino unhappy. He couldn't let that frown remain.

“No, it's okay,” he said. “I want to.” He did really mean that. He would love to skate with him. If only he could trust himself.

“You do?” Tino asked.

“Mm.”

“We could start slower then; I could lead you around the rink while you hold the wall. Does that sound good?”

That...actually wouldn't be a bad solution. He wouldn't mind that. Because he would be able to stabilize himself with the wall while also holding onto Tino's hand. He felt his face heat against the cold air. No...it wouldn't be a bad solution at all. Henrik gave Tino a nod, and his frown immediately melted away, squeezing his hand before speaking.

“Oh good,” Tino said, scratching the back of his neck and glancing away for a moment. “I was worried I made you uncomfortable or something.”

Henrik shook his head.

“You couldn't.”

That wasn't a lie.

Tino snorted a little awkward laugh before slowly starting to pull him along the side of the wall. Their skates easily glided against the ice as light clicking sounds were heard from below them. He didn't move too quickly—something that Henrik was very grateful for. Each stride of his was slow as he skated; his lilac eyes closed as he hummed some song or another—which Henrik could tell was some kind of vaguely familiar rock song. Perhaps he'd heard it several years ago, but he couldn't quite place it. Henrik squeezed their hands together tighter. If there was one thing he liked about Tino (of which there were many things), he liked that as much as he could be loud, boisterous, and energetic, he could also be serene and quiet. He liked that there could be moments of complete silence like this, and for it to not be uncomfortable or strange. Because Tino understood him.

Because they understood each other.

Tino moved in front of him, effortlessly skating backwards as he guided Henrik along the wall. He knew Tino probably would've scolded him for thinking it...but he couldn't exactly help it. Tino was just...perfect. With snow white skin and plump lips that were ripe for kissing. If he leaned down and

kissed him now he'd probably reciprocate it. It was still completely unbelievable to him. That Tino would hold his hand—that he'd kiss his lips and tell him he loved him.

He felt his face burn against the cold of the ice rink.

That he'd called him 'kulta'. Maybe looking up Finnish terms of endearment that night in the hospital was a bit strange, but he couldn't help it. He was a man in love; a man who'd only ever been in love once.

He wasn't even sure what it was about him that drew him to him, but from the second he saw him...it was as if he'd been struck by cupid's bow. He'd never experienced those emotions before, and it was such a shock to him that he could hardly understand what was happening at all. That feeling of his racing heart, pounding against his chest as he stared across the courtyard to look at a person who he'd never seen before.

Mathias and Lukas had been completely flabbergasted, and part of him wondered if they thought he'd never be able to find love at all. Regardless, Mathias made it his life's mission to get the two of them together—trying his best to put them in situations where they'd interact. Obviously, it had never worked. He had just been too shy and flustered to say anything, because even after a year of pining, Tino still made his breath catch and his chest tighten. It was because of Mathias that he was with Tino now, because if it hadn't been for him, he'd have never started talking to him in the first place. And as annoying as that idiot could be...he really was glad that he had him, because he had been his first and only friend for a very long time. He really was grateful for that.

Tino gave him an easy smile, reaching up and brushing the hair out of Henrik's face. "Something on your mind?" he asked, softly cupping Henrik's face in his hand.

"No, it's nothin'," he replied. He leaned into the touch, feeling himself form the tiniest little smile as he placed his own hand over Tino's.

He jerked slightly in surprise. "Look! You're doing it! You're skating!"

Henrik furrowed his eyebrows, and looked down to realize that he was no longer holding onto the wall.

He was doing it. He was actually skating.

"I'm so proud of you!" Tino shouted happily. He looked so excited, and his grip tightened in an elated squeeze.

That smile he'd felt before couldn't stop growing.

"Wait here," Tino said, dropping his hands as a grin took over his face. He skated out onto the rink, excitedly cheering as he built up an intense amount of speed, finally culminating into a jump as he screamed with joy. But Tino was no figure skater. He landed on his back with a hard thud. There was no cracking sound, only the sliding thump of a man who had jumped beyond his ability. He let out a sad little yelp of pain, as the sound of his fall echoed all around them.

"Tino!" Henrik shouted in alarm.

His thoughts vanished from his brain, not even pausing to remember that he was on the rink as he raced over to him—his lumbering form slipping and stumbling as he tried his best to get to where his beloved had fallen.

“Tino! Are you okay?” He almost yelled when he made it to his side, leaning down over him to assess the damage.

But when he made it to him, he was smiling; he was smiling so hard that it looked like it hurt. He sat up, and reaching with his hands, pulled Henrik down with him. He was laughing and giggling as they laid on the freezing ice together.

“I love you so much!” he said, looking down at him as he cupped his face in his hands.

Henrik smiled up at him and kissed his lips.

They had left shortly after that, having needed to actually get to their classes. To Henrik’s surprise, Tino happily let him drive his car, kicking his feet up onto the dashboard as he controlled the music, wanting to show him all his favorite songs. And when they arrived at their school’s campus, they walked out of the parking lot hand in hand.

“I have a couple of classes in the afternoon, so I’ll take you to the apartment at around four, okay?” Henrik gave a simple nod and Tino reached up, putting his hand on his cheek. “It’ll end up okay, I promise.”

He doubted that, but he wouldn’t be the one to voice that opinion.

Something within him told him that Tino felt that way too.

“Okay, I need to get to class, but I’ll see you later okay?”

“Mm.”

Tino leaned forward, wrapping his arms around his neck, and Henrik, a little unsure of what to do with his hands, placed them on his waist. He felt Tino smile after doing that, and he supposed it was something he should do more often.

“I love you,” he said.

“Love you too.”

Tino gave him another quick peck and Henrik squeezed him closer before releasing him.

“Bye,” he mumbled.

Tino turned and left his embrace, “See you soon.”

His breath hitched, wanting to affirm his feelings for him again, but it was too late. He was already gone.

“Aw, look at you Ricky,” came that familiar voice, “kissing your boyfriend out in public like that. Good for you buddy!”

Henrik felt his face burn so hot that it felt like it was on fire.

Mathias.

He whipped around, seeing both him and Lukas walking over to him. He cursed himself.

They had seen everything.

“He’s not my boyfriend,” Henrik quickly countered.

The two of them groaned.

“Are you serious?” Mathias complained.

“If he’s not your boyfriend then why are you wearing his shirt?” Lukas asked in a teasing tone, smiling as his lips curled upward into a catlike grin. “Don’t think I didn’t notice that you’re wearing his last name on your back.”

Somehow his face was growing even warmer. “Cause he’s not,” he replied indignantly.

“Then what are you two? Because at this point I’m getting concerned,” Mathias asked, puffing his cheek out.

Henrik knew it was not a question that he could answer, and any answer he *did* give wouldn’t be completely accurate. They weren’t together, but they weren’t *not* together either. All Henrik knew was that they certainly weren’t *friends*. It was more than that. *Friends* don’t kiss each other, cuddle, and say ‘I love you’, or call each other pet names. Those are all boyfriend things. But they were not boyfriends. So Henrik supposed that they were something in between. If only there was a word for that.

“...I don’t know,” he finally replied.

Lukas sighed and shook his head. “Of course you don’t.”

Mathias too sighed slightly before returning to his usual demeanor, wrapping an arm around Henrik’s shoulders and shaking him slightly. “You’re really coming into your own, buddy, now you just have to reel him in!”

“A big fish like that is hard to catch.” Lukas said in stoic agreement. “I would know,” Mathias laughed.

“...Thanks,” Henrik mumbled, fighting the urge to roll his eyes. He hated when they talked about fishing, which they did surprisingly often.

He felt the light patting of his friend’s hand in acknowledgement.

“Now we got places to go, don’t we?” he smiled.

“Hm,” Lukas nodded.

And just like it had been back in high school, the three of them set off together.

Tino nervously chewed on the inside of his lip. His classes had lasted for *far* too long. Usually, his schedule had left him pretty open, but with winter break coming up it seemed that his professors were putting special care into taking up as much of his free time as possible. It really was just his luck that most of his lessons were lectures too, leaving him to scratch his neck as he dealt with his terrible anxiety. But the hardest part wasn’t sitting through the lectures, it was desperately trying not to remember something. But he knew they were there. He’d used them many times before, and they had their special place. All this anxiety culminated in a desperate desire to go to his car and relieve his tension with what waited there.

But he wasn't about to fall back into old habits. He knew better than that. *He* was better than that. He'd come this far, hadn't he?

So, all he could do was scratch his neck and bounce his foot to work off some of the stress he was feeling. He was worried; his heart laden with fretful thoughts. Because his anticipation was getting the best of him.

He *needed* Henrik's apartment to be okay.

But he just knew it wouldn't be.

When Tino had been released from his last class, he practically ran to the front entrance of the building, tearing through crowded hallways to get to where he and Henrik had arranged to meet earlier that day.

Henrik was already waiting for him when he made it there, his eyebrows knitted and an intense frown sitting on his face. He was blankly staring ahead. Though there were a few other people around, they kept looking at him and quietly whispering, voices strained in discomfort. It seemed that they had been put off by the intimidating aura that was emanating from his person.

Tino pressed his teeth together slightly in annoyance. They just didn't understand that that was the face that he made when he was deep in concentration. It bothered him beyond belief that these people were so rude, not even caring to get to know him before making their judgements. Because Tino thought that the face he was making was quite cute.

"Hi!" he greeted in a happy little voice, perhaps raised a little too loudly as he knew he was anxious. Several heads turned to face him, staring in confusion as he so jovially approached someone who they probably thought was the scariest man they'd ever seen.

Henrik immediately brightened as Tino approached him, his face falling back into that familiar fine line. His sea-green eyes seemed to sparkle as they fell on him. Tino reached out his arm and laced their fingers together.

"Let's get out of here," he said.

"Mm," Henrik agreed in a monotone hum that he *knew* meant that he was happy.

They stepped out of the building together, neither feeling the need to mention how the crowd parted for them.

When they got to the car, Tino didn't hesitate in surrendering the driver's seat. It's not that he hated driving or anything, but Henrik had been very insistent on driving them around this morning. It was unusual for him, because he was hardly ever insistent on *anything*. He wouldn't complain about the switch either, because it meant that he could control the music easier. That had always been his favorite thing about being in his car anyway.

Well, that and one other thing...

He cleared his throat, and let his eyes refocus back to Henrik, who seemed particularly antsy as he tapped his fingers on the steering wheel.

He knew it must be killing him. Still, it didn't affect his driving, and the car moved gently, always following the speed limit and diligently stopping at every stop sign. It really amazed him that he could

pay so much attention to the road, with his face held taut in concentration. He liked when he looked like that, with silky blond hair that fell just above the slightly pink laceration on his forehead.

Tino frowned heavily. He had known that it would scar.

Still, it hurt that his own mistakes had resulted in a permanent mark on his lover's forehead. A permanent reminder of his own failures. He thought bitterly.

He felt an itching in his fingers and he quickly knotted his hands together. He knew he shouldn't, but he couldn't help but stare at the glovebox.

He was too tense, both of them were. They were in *desperate* need of something to lighten the mood. And as the car DJ, that responsibility fell to him. He supposed he'd have to fulfill his rightful duty. He typed on his phone for a few seconds, and then leaned forward, turning up the volume slightly as the familiar sound of the organ filled the car.

Hard! Rock! Hallelujah! Blared the speakers.

"Hard! Rock! Hallelujah!" Tino enthusiastically repeated.

Henrik's face relaxed slightly before contorting again, almost as if he was trying to remember something. The car was filled with the blasting of the electric guitar and Tino's excited shouting of the words. It had always been one of his favorite songs...it held so many memories, so many happy moments.

Maybe it was silly to get sentimental about it, but he really couldn't help it.

"I've heard this song before..." Henrik mumbled just loud enough for Tino to hear it.

"You have?!" Tino shouted excitedly.

"Mm," he hummed, leaning forward a little in his seat, listening closely as the chorus echoed once again. "This was Finland's Eurovision win, right?"

"Yeah!" Tino yelled over the music, "2006!"

"Mm," Henrik hummed a little, relaxing and leaning back against the seat, "...think Sweden gave twelve points to this one..."

"Oh, really?!"

He nodded.

Tino reached over, launching up from his seat and straining against the seatbelt as he wrapped the side of Henrik's frame in a warm embrace.

"Thank you so much!"

As per the rules of Eurovision, televoting had not been implemented back then, as well as the fact that he couldn't vote for his own country. It was thanks to the other nations across Europe that a win for Finland was even possible. Even though he knew that Henrik wasn't in any respect responsible for their win, it still made him glow just the same. Because just like good neighbors, Sweden had supported Finland.

Henrik glanced at him briefly, taking his eyes off the road for a moment to look at him. A light smile traced his lips, and he let out the tiniest puff of a laugh. “You’re welcome.”

The music began to swell for the final time, and Tino jumped back down in his seat. “Sing the chorus with me!” he shouted.

But Henrik shook his head. “I don’t sing,” he said.

Though he had denied the request, he still seemed to be quite happy. And if he was happy, Tino wouldn’t question it. He finished off the song with a loud yell, laughing to himself as he reached forward and turned the music back down.

“You know, back in Finland, my mother, father, grandfather and I all watched that performance together.” He paused, “God, how old was I? 9? Anyway, we were all sitting around the TV...none of us thought that we’d actually win. And when we did...” He smiled brightly and crossed his arms over his chest in remembrance of an embrace. “It was so amazing, everyone was so happy. My mother and father hugged each other so tightly, and my grandfather lifted me all the way up into the air—so excited that we won...” “You know, my dad never liked my grandfather, always saying that he was a bad influence on me. Not that I believed him of course but...in that moment, none of it mattered, and we were all so...happy together...”

Those were the good times. When life wasn’t so complicated, sure, they didn’t *always* get along, but the air of comradery had vanished since his father’s passing. Tino wanted to feel that closeness again, but some things can’t be changed. Death can do that to a family. He still wasn’t sure if he ever really got over it. Was it possible to ‘get over’ the sudden death of a family member? Was that even a question worth asking?

“A couple of days after our win, my dad took me to Helsinki, and...” he began to sniffle a little, “and we got to sing karaoke with the whole city and—And my dad lifted me up on his shoulders—” A tear ran down his face.



Henrik's attention was immediately on him, glancing between him and the road as unmistakable concern completely took over his face. "Tino, you okay?" he asked, reaching over and patting him reassuringly.

"Yes, yes," he immediately apologized, wiping the tear off his cheek. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to get so emotional."

“Don’t need to apologize for that.”

Tino sniffled again, “Oh, right, sorry.”

Henrik’s eyebrows furrowed, likely disagreeing with his second apology, but he didn’t vocalize it.

“It’s just that,” Tino muttered, clearing his throat. “I miss Finland. That’s all.”

Henrik’s eyes shifted between him and the road. “...Why’d you leave then?”

“I live here now,” He replied stiffly, “*This* is my new home.”

Henrik’s worried expression didn’t leave him, though he still nodded, likely not wanting to intrude too much on such personal matters. The two of them said nothing else for the rest of the car ride.

When they arrived at the apartment complex, they didn’t speak a word. Their hands instinctively interlaced as they walked together through the parking lot. The asphalt felt hard against the soles of Tino’s shoes and the air chilled him through his jacket. He inhaled a steep breath and watched as the thick cloud of mist disappeared into the air.

The apartment was much different from when he had first seen it—but then again—it had been at night—and on fire. Regardless, he and Henrik walked through the lobby quickly, not really bothering to take in their surroundings as they stepped up the stairs. The stairs that he had saved him on. Tino shook the memory away and squeezed Henrik’s hand, an action that was immediately reciprocated.

His heart was pounding in his chest, and his head felt light. Each step felt like it started too soon and ended too slowly. He could hardly take the anticipation anymore. He just wanted everything to be okay. He *needed* it to be. At least for Henrik’s sake.

As they exited the stairwell, it seemed that Henrik’s door had come into view, because he inhaled sharply before letting it out in a long, drawn out sigh.

Tino didn’t even have to ask which one was his, because it had a large note taped to the door.

His heart sank.

“What’s that?” Tino asked weakly, already knowing exactly what it was.

Henrik didn’t answer him, and the two of them stepped forward, stopping in front of the door. Henrik ripped it from the door, seeming to read it over and over again until he couldn’t anymore. He pulled the paper down from his face and put it to his side.

“Mathias and I’ve got thirty days to move out,” he said.

It almost didn’t feel real.

But it seemed that everyone knew this had been coming. It was inevitable, as much as they didn’t want it to be.

Tino reached forward and grabbed for Henrik’s hands, letting the paper fall to the floor as he looked in his eyes.

“How about you stay with me for the next couple of days?” he asked.

He knew it was impulsive, but damn it all he didn't care. He'd happily let him stay with him for a bit. He had been kind to him, and he cared about him a lot. If he could do one thing for him to make up for all that he had done for him—that would be enough. And it's not like his roommates would care—they've all invited people over before—they were all fairly easy going when it came to that sort of thing.

Well...as easy-going as people like them could be. Still though, they probably wouldn't mind, especially if they knew that he was going to be helping out someone who needed it.

...Especially if they knew that this person was a lot more than just a friend.

But Henrik shook his head. "No, won't make you do that. Lukas'll understand. I can stay with him and Mathias. It's—"

"But you hate staying there!" Tino interjected, "Please—let me help you. You bought a phone for me, it's the *least* I could do. I owe you."

Henrik's back slouched. Perhaps he felt guilty about the whole thing. Tino squeezed his hands in reassurance, thousands of unspoken words passing between them as they stood in silence. They shared nothing, but everything at the same time. Henrik finally relented, putting his head down and breaking eye contact as he stared to the floor.

"...Fine," he muttered.

Tino leaned forward, pushing himself up on his toes and kissing the top of his head. "Now why don't we go inside?" he suggested softly. "You can pack a bag with the stuff you need and then we can come back here tomorrow and get the rest of your things. Does that sound good?"

Henrik nodded again, his lips pressed into a tight line as he dug through his pocket and pulled out a key. He pushed it into the lock and opened the door.

To say the apartment was a wreck would be an understatement. The walls were charred and all sorts of furniture had been flipped over, the kitchen table, a bookshelf full of math textbooks, and their couch to name a few things. Unrecognizable belongings were littered all across the floor, too covered in ash to be anything Tino could recognize without closer inspection. And worst of all, it still smelled like smoke.

They really should have known that this would be what it would look like. Deep down they did. It's just that neither had wanted to admit it.

"Damn Mathias," Henrik muttered halfheartedly, not really meaning it. "...worked hard on those." He squeezed Tino's hand.

"Hm? What do you mean?"

"The furniture...I built it all." He closed his eyes and let out another sad sigh.

"Hey! It's okay!" Tino said, moving his hand up to Henrik's cheek and pulling it up slightly, "We can make new ones!"

The other man didn't noticeably react to his statement.

Tino could hardly blame him. It must hurt seeing the fruits of his craftsmanship burned and scorched before his very eyes. It seemed that not even Tino's presence could deter him from the sadness he felt.

And seeing him like that, It felt like his heart was being ripped out.

Henrik shuffled around the living room, loosely dragging Tino behind him as he turned to the left, taking them down a hallway before stopping in front of a door. He paused for a minute, hesitating as he glanced behind him and then back ahead before opening the door.

Tino didn't even have to be in this new room for a second to know that it was Henrik's. There was a telescope by the window next to a bed with star patterned covers. Boxes of puzzles were stacked neatly in one corner, going almost as high as the ceiling. On a varnished wooden desk, was a collection of wood carvings, all of different kinds of forest animals. The room just *seemed* like him, if that made any sense.

"Oh wow," Tino breathed as he walked over to admire a carving of a bear, "did you make these?"

"Mm."

Tino stared down at the collection for a moment. There was a fox, a deer, a moose, a dog, and a bear. The bear carving looked to be the newest, as it was much more detailed. Obviously, he'd made it when he'd been more skilled at his craft. He picked it up, wanting to inspect it more. How long had Henrik spent whittling away at every detail on this bear with that carving knife? Those eyes of black glass seemed to swallow Tino whole as his fingers traced the fine wooden hairs of the wooden animal.

"Wow," Tino whispered to himself.

"Oh," Henrik mumbled, noticing that Tino was staring at the bear. "Um," he looked away, looking slightly embarrassed before seeming to regain his composure.

"How long did this take you?" Tino asked enthusiastically, "It looks incredible!"

"3 or 4 weeks." Henrik replied quietly.

"It's wonderful!"

"Thanks," he muttered.

Henrik turned, his eyes falling to the floor as he went to a closet in the back of the room and pulled out a bag. He then moved to his dresser and started piling clothes into it. Tino went over to him, feeling a little concerned.

"Are you okay?"

"Mm."

"...Are you sure?"

"Mm." He grunted more firmly.

He finished putting his clothes into the bag and half-heartedly swung it over his shoulder. "Come on," he mumbled, picking up the collection of wood carvings and holding them tightly to his chest. Tino followed.

The car ride back to Tino's house was spent in complete and utter silence. The only thing they shared was the feeling of their interlaced hands. Henrik's eyebrows were furrowed, deep in thought. Tino

wondered what was going on inside his head, as he was hard to read with his walls put up. All Tino knew was that Henrik was very upset. And he wasn't sure what he could do to make him feel better.

When they arrived at Tino's house, his roommates were nowhere to be found, well, all except for Raivis, who had greeted them at the door. He had taken one look at Henrik's face and known exactly what was wrong, and it surprised him greatly when he leaned forward and gave him a brief little hug before retreating into the kitchen.

He'd never been one to initiate physical affection... And as bewildered as Henrik had been by it, he'd accepted it gratefully.

And so now, they sat in Tino's room. The armful of wood carvings had been placed on his dresser. Henrik laid with his head resting against Tino's chest, letting him run his hands through his hair. His fingers brushed over his skin until they finally traced the scar on his forehead. A feeling of cold ran through him as his fingers traced the injury, feeling the peaks and valleys that now permanently marked his face.

"How about we do something fun?" Tino suggested, pulling him closer, "To help get your mind off it."

Henrik looked up at him, sad eyes meeting his own. "...That sounds nice..."

Tino ran his hands down his cheeks, cupping them softly. "Is there something you'd like to do?"

Henrik was silent for a moment.

"...Can we play Minecraft?"

"Of course," Tino answered sweetly, "I'd love to play that with you."

His eyes brightened a little, and he sat up, moving to the side of the bed and pulling out his laptop. He typed on it for a few minutes before moving closer to Tino. The game booted up and he lifted his laptop up with his hand. He averted his eyes, shyly inviting Tino to sit in between his legs. Obviously he did, and he kissed his cheek before settling back down. He felt Henrik's warm arms wrap around him.

"...Love you," he mumbled, putting the computer back down on Tino's lap.

"I love you too."

Soft and ambient music filled the room and Henrik settled his chin on Tino's shoulder, resting against him as he clicked through a couple of menus before the game started to load.

He'd never really been one for computer games; he hadn't really had the time to play them. Not when he'd been a teenager anyway. Still though, this was the game that he and Henrik had been talking about awhile ago. He was glad that the two of them were able to play it now. He'd be glad for any opportunity to cheer him up.

The laptop whirled as the game finally loaded, bringing Henrik's character to view an extremely impressive tower of blocks. He'd never seen anything like it. It was huge, spanning the entire screen along with some extra. To be honest he didn't really remember a lot about this game, but he *did* remember that Henrik had said you could build things...

Had he built that castle all by himself?

It was incredible.

“Woah,” he breathed, “did you build that?”

“Mm.”

“That’s so amazing…”

“Thanks,” he mumbled shyly. “It’s the Kalmar castle, in Sweden.”

“You did such a good job on it,” Tino said, leaning his body back against Henrik’s chest. He watched a hand that had been on the computer come and tightly wrap around his waist.

“You think so?”

“Yes!” Tino replied enthusiastically.

“...glad you like it.”

They ended up playing together until the sun went down, Tino remaining nestled in Henrik’s arms the entire time. He had shown him all kinds of things, like how to craft items and make potions. It wasn’t long before Henrik’s signature tiny little smile returned to his face.

Cheering him up really wasn’t as hard as you’d think. He was a simple man who didn’t need too much to be happy. Tino liked that about him.

Henrik had offered to let him play but he strongly objected, submitting himself to watching him instead. He liked it that way. Because he liked seeing Henrik work on something so passionately—even if it *was* just a video game. He liked it when he showed him his farm, his dogs, and his little kitten...

The world be damned, because Henrik was the cutest man he’d ever met.

“Tino, look,” Henrik said, his voice quiet with enthusiasm, “diamonds.”

“Oh! You need those right?”

“Mm. I think I’ll have enough to finish my armor set now.”

“Yay!” Tino cheered, “Finally!”

Henrik sighed slightly and took his hands off the computer, instead bringing them to wrap affectionately around Tino’s waist.

“...Thanks for cheerin’ me up,” he said, burying his face against the back of Tino’s shoulder.

Tino turned around, wrapping his arms around Henrik’s neck and pulling him into a strong embrace. “Anytime, kulta.”

Henrik said nothing more, squeezing him tightly and bringing their lips together into a kiss.

It was sweet and loving, the kind of kiss reserved for one’s true love if such a thing existed. Tino’s heart fluttered and jumped in his chest, in the way it had been doing ever since Henrik had stumbled into his life. He was passionate, but in a subdued kind of way, with his true intensity only showing

through the intensity of his kisses. Henrik cared a lot, and that's all Tino needed. It felt good to be loved.

He turned, wrapping his arms around Henrik's waist and bringing him closer. They broke their kiss, and their eyes fluttered open. Tino chuckled to himself, looking at the light red blush on Henrik's face. The other man looked away shyly, but only for a moment before he pulled Tino close and brought him back into a kiss. Back into that heaven that existed only when they were alone together like this. Their hands traced downwards.

"This okay?" Henrik asked when they broke apart again.

Tino smiled at him, "yes."

Henrik's warm hands pushed themselves up Tino's shirt and onto his back as they kissed again. He wasn't moving quickly, rather in a slow, deliberate, and savory way. So that Tino always knew what he was doing, and so they could both enjoy the moment as much as they wanted to without worrying about the other's comfort.

They were suddenly interrupted by a loud rapping at the door.

Immediately, they scrambled off each other, both sitting up in obvious panic as the door opened to reveal Raivis.

"Tolys made dinner," he said aloofly.

"Oh! Did he?" Tino said in an anxious voice. "When did he get home?"

"He's been here for hours," Raivis responded.

There was a tense silence.

"...Come down if you want any." He turned and left the room.

As soon as he was gone, he turned to see that Henrik's face was lightly dappled with red. He covered his face with his hands to hide it.

"Hey! It's okay," Tino reassured him, though he knew his face was no better than Henrik's. "He didn't see anything!"

Henrik shook his head. "It's the principle," he murmured.

Tino laughed a little, and brought him close, kissing the top of his head in reassurance.

"...Hey, Tino," he said quietly.

"Yes?"

"...Can we play some more minecraft?"

"Of course we can." Tino smiled.

Their lips met each other's and Tino placed the laptop back down on his lap.

"Now where were we...?"

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes



The bell of the door jingled as Henrik, Tino, Mathias, Lukas, and Emil all stepped inside a little French coffee shop. Mathias had insisted that they go out for coffee after their classes. Now that winter break was here it'd be nice for them all to relax. They'd need something to keep their energy up, they had a difficult job ahead after all. Mathias had *also* insisted on paying for everyone's drinks, and shoved them off to go sit at a table by the window once he had collected their orders. Perhaps he felt guilty about the apartment... Henrik couldn't blame him.

When the four of them sat down, the air was filled with a tense silence. It was the beginning of winter break, and Henrik supposed he could've been happy about that, but it didn't make what they were about to do any easier. He and Mathias had lost their home, and now they were going to need to move all of their things out of it.

Four years worth of memories...

He shook his head from the thought and felt Tino's hand clutch his. He had a concerned look on his face as their eyes met. Tino had gotten too good at reading him. He turned from him and looked across the table, where Emil sat closest to the wall. He was leaning with his back against it, angling his body so that no one could read his phone screen. Next to him was Mathias' empty seat, followed by Lukas' chair. He was staring deeply at the door, seemingly lost in thought.

The cafe was a quaint little place, with light brown wallpaper decorated with faded 'fleur-de-lis' symbols. There were a couple of other booths and tables that were available, but most of them were full. The barista that Mathias was talking to at the front of the shop had blond hair that was tied up in a ponytail and wore a grimace on his face. He probably thought that Mathias' French was terrible, as he was trying to read the names of the drinks off the menu. Henrik could've made fun of him, but it's not like he could do any better.

He felt Tino squeeze his hand again, and he squeezed it back. Seeing the apartment in that state had been difficult for him. He was glad that Tino had been there. Before, he'd seen the things he'd built as the things he cherished most. He remembered building them, sitting on the floor with nails in his mouth and rolling eyes as Mathias watched him from close-by—attempting to play an electric guitar that he had promptly abandoned in the following months. Those were some of his fondest memories.

But now... He could hardly believe that it was all gone.

"What's with you guys' faces?" Mathias said cheerfully as he sat down in his seat between Emil and Lukas. He wrapped his arms around their shoulders.

"I'd think that'd be obvious," Emil said, taking Mathias' arm off.

"Aw come on, it's not so bad!"

Henrik's frown tightened.

He didn't want to find somewhere new. He liked it how it was. It was just going to be a repeat of what had happened last time. His heart ached a little in his chest. He didn't want to be stuck in this weird situation, and as nice as it was to be sleeping in Tino's room every night, he'd much rather just have a stable place to stay. Not to mention Tino's roommates; Eduard and Tolys were fine enough he supposed, but it was Raivis he was worried about. He was...strange to say the least. Though, he did appreciate the hug he'd received from him. He'd really needed that.

"It is," Lukas said.

Mathias scratched the back of his head. “Okay, yeah, it is kind of bad, but look on the bright side, we get to hang out now!”

“We could’ve hung out if you didn’t burn the apartment down,” Emil said sharply.

It was quiet for a few moments.

“...Yeah,” Mathias said, putting his head down.

Another silence.

“So, uh—happy winter break!” Tino said, attempting a smile as he awkwardly readjusted his father’s jacket.

“Mm,” Henrik said.

He was hardly enthused about the whole thing. Hell, he was probably going to be moving all his things into Tino’s room while he figured things out. To think he was basically moving in with him and they weren’t even boyfriends yet.

He really hoped he wouldn’t mind.

...He’d really *like* to be boyfriends with Tino though. That would be nice... But he wouldn’t push for it. If that wasn’t something that Tino wanted then he’d be okay with it. His love was enough for him, labels or not. Though...a label would be nice. It was something solid; it defined something. But maybe Tino just needed more time. If that was the case he’d gladly wait for him. He’d wait as long as he required of him, he’d wait until the end of the Earth.

“So now that classes are out, Christmas should be here soon right?” Mathias’ dopey smile returned as he ran a hand through his hair. “Usually we have a big party, so, Tino, do you wanna come? No pressure obviously.”

“Oh! Well, if you’re inviting me I’d love to. Christmas is my favorite time of year, but I’d hate to intrude on your little tradition,” Tino said.

“What? No way! You’re one of us now, so you’re totally invited!” Mathias immediately countered.

Tino laughed, “Then I’d love to come.”

“Thank god,” Lukas said. “Now that you’re here I don’t have to deal with *those two*,” he gestured with his eyes to Mathias and Henrik, “on my own anymore.”

Henrik huffed a little laugh, the tenseness from before having been alliviated.

The bell at the door of the cafe jingled, and five heads turned to see who had entered. It was a blond-haired man in all black—wearing a leather jacket, combat boots, lots of eyeliner, and painted black nails. Henrik immediately recognized him as Arthur Kirkland, how could he not? Those eyebrows...he’d know them anywhere—regardless of the cloaks Lukas made them all wear when he and Valentin came over.

“Arthur!” the barista hissed, “I’m only serving customers, shoo!”

“I *am* a customer, *Francis*,” He replied coldly.

The barista gave a facetious little smile, before gesturing for him to come forward.

Those two didn't seem to like each other in the slightest.

When Arthur was done ordering, he went to the back wall, leaning one foot against it as he waited.

The barista rolled his eyes, and after a few moments dinged the bell on the counter, signaling that their drinks were ready. Mathias was about to stand when Lukas stood.

"I'll get them," he said. "Emil, Tino, come with me."

Emil huffed in annoyance but stood, shoving his phone in his pocket and trudging over to stand next to his brother. Tino looked a little confused, but also stood, squeezing Henrik's hand twice before letting go.

"I'd like you to meet my friend," Lukas said to Tino, glancing over to Mathias with a slight nod. "I think you'd get along..."

Henrik stopped listening to their conversation.

Now it was just him and Mathias at the table.

The man across from him sighed a little and ran his hand through his hair, his head angled down. "...You're upset."

There was no point in hiding the obvious truth, not when Mathias could read him like a book.

"Yes."

"I'm sorry."

"It's okay, Mathias."

He looked up and met his eyes. "It's not."

"I said it is," Henrik responded firmly.

He lowered his head again. "But it is! I get it! I ruined all your stuff, *our* stuff. You spent hours building it all, and I destroyed it. It's my fault." Very rarely would he see Mathias being so negative, it wasn't like him. And even though he had been the one to set the place ablaze, he didn't blame him for it. He knew that there wasn't a lot that he could do about the guilt he was feeling, but he could at least tell him that he didn't think it was his fault.

Henrik reached over the table and placed a gentle hand over Mathias'. "I don't blame you for it. It's okay."

He felt Mathias grip his hand and interlace their fingers. "Are you sure?"

"Mm."

It was then that Mathias stood and walked around the table, going over to Henrik and hugging him.

"...I love you, buddy," he said.

Henrik laughed a little and rubbed his back. "Love you too..."

Mathias always gave the best hugs. His arms were strong and he always held close. He'd been that way ever since they were just kids—though he'd received them a lot less back then. He was really warm too, and would squeeze tightly before loosening.

“...Maybe it was for the best.”

Mathias recoiled, “Huh? Why would you say that?”

“...‘Cause you and Lukas should have moved in together a long time ago...I know you stayed just to keep me company.” Mathias didn't have much to say to that, only looking to the floor before looking back up. He was thankful that he had stayed. He knew he would've been lonely without him. But still, he didn't want to be a strain on his friend's relationship...

“It's okay,” he reassured, “you can live with Lukas now. I've got Tino.”

Mathias squeezed him tighter.

“...Thanks Ricky. You mean a lot to me.”

“You mean a lot to me too.”



“Are you two done?” Lukas asked.

The two of them turned, to see Lukas, Emil, and Tino approaching, all holding different cups of coffee. Mathias let go as Tino handed Henrik what was labeled to be Frappuccino Au Chocolat, while he kept one labeled as an Americano. He liked that just fine, he preferred the sweeter things.

“Let’s get going. I’d like to get that place cleaned up sooner rather than later,” Lukas said.

“Mhm,” Tino humed in agreement, “Then we can all go home and relax after a long day's work.”

Henrik felt his face heat slightly. He’d like that a lot.

“Come on then,” Lukas said with a roll of his eyes. “Let’s get this over with.”

Tino knotted his fingers together as his eyes danced around the burned apartment. The five of them had their work cut out for them, and they’d have to move quickly. Mathias had called a moving company to dispose of their ruined furniture. Henrik had said that he’d help move it down and outside to be picked up, but insisted he not be there when it was carted off.

Tino couldn’t really blame him for that.

“God, how does it still reek?” Emil complained, waving the smokey air out of his face. He went straight ahead, and opened a window, allowing the chilly air from outside to blow into the apartment. Mathias immediately started to shiver, but he didn’t say anything about it.

“Luke-y, will you help me clean my room out?” he asked.

“I suppose,” he responded with a roll of his eyes.

“Yay!” He seemed very happy about that, probably excited to get out of the cold that he—unlike the rest of them—was so unaccustomed to. Mathias made a grab for Lukas’ hand and he dragged him off down a hallway, disappearing down the door that lay at the end.

Tino slipped his jacket off, placing it on a couch and tugging at one of the sleeves of his shirt.

“Ready to get started then?” he asked Emil and Henrik. Oddly enough, they both wore light blushes as they looked at him. Emil cleared his throat and waved at the air some more.

“You okay?” Henrik asked, leaning down and patting his shoulder. His eyebrows furrowed in concern.

“What? Uh, yeah, sorry. H—it’s hot as shit in this room. Does the air conditioning work?” Emil turned to look at the window he had opened.

Tino and Henrik exchanged a confused glance.

“Um, anyway—I’m gonna go see if Lukas and Mathias need any help.”

He rushed off.

“...That was weird,” Tino said, watching him go.

Henrik shrugged lightly. “Teenagers.”

Tino laughed a little and stepped closer to him, “Right,” he hummed. Henrik wrapped his hands around his waist and kissed the top of his head. “I bet you were a cute one.” He laughed awkwardly,

unsure if that was too forward.

“Hm, not me,” Henrik hummed thoughtfully as he smiled with his eyes. “Always had battle scars.”

“Battle scars”? From what?” Tino locked his hands behind Henrik’s waist and laid his head on his chest.

“Mathias.”

They began to rock together gently from side to side, like an awkward but loving couple at a high school dance.

“I know he said you two didn’t get along all the time.”

“Mm.”

“Did he really hurt you like that?” Tino asked sadly.

“Hurt *each other* like that,” Henrik corrected. “He has scars from me too. Lot more.”

“...I see,” Tino said.

Maybe it was silly of him, but he didn’t like thinking about that. Even though he knew that things like that had happened years ago, it still hurt a little. He didn’t like to think about Henrik in pain, Mathias too.

“Don’t be upset about it,” Henrik said, moving his calloused hands up to gently caress Tino’s cheek. “We’re friends now. Always were.”

“Ah, I know.” Tino said, squeezing him. “I’m glad about that. I couldn’t imagine you two *not* being friends.”

“Mm.”

There was a brief silence.

“...How many scars do you have?”

“Hm,” Henrik hummed, “...eleven.” He paused again and gestured to the mark on his forehead.

“Twelve.”

“Oh wow,” Tino said, “That’s a lot.”

“Mm.”

There was another silence.

“Can I see?” Tino asked.

Henrik’s grip loosened, and he looked down at him with an incredibly flustered look on his face. He took his hand off Tino’s cheek and cleared his throat, deliberately looking away from him. “Uh...”

It took him by surprise that he was so embarrassed about it, but then again, it seemed that he was embarrassed by a lot of intimate things. Though he hadn’t meant it in that kind of way. It didn’t escape Tino’s notice that, for whatever reason, he only ever acted awkward about his body when he

was around. But he wouldn't force him to show himself off. He trusted that with time, he'd be able to do it himself.

"I'm sorry!" Tino apologized, "I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable!"

But Henrik shook his head. "It's okay." He was quiet again, and he moved his hand back to Tino's waist. "...I can...show you one...if you'd like..." he mumbled.

Tino recoiled a tiny amount, looking up to him in shock. "Only if you want," he said.

"I do."

They met each other's eyes, and Henrik retracted his hands, pulling up slightly on his shirt and down on his jeans to reveal a small patch of skin; at the middle of which lay a jagged white scar.

"Oh wow," Tino breathed. He looked up to Henrik. "May I?"

"Mm."

Tino reached forward and ran his hand over it. "What happened?"

"Hm," he hummed again. "8th grade, he accidentally pushed me into a window, broke it." A small puff of air escaped him in a laugh. "Felt bad about that one."

"I can imagine," Tino said, looking up at him briefly before letting his eyes fall back to the scar. Henrik removed his hands, and his clothes fell back to their usual resting position.

"It's okay." He gave a tiny shrug—one that most people probably wouldn't've noticed. "Got back at him."

"How?"

Henrik smiled lightly and returned his arms to Tino's waist. "Pushed him into one too."

Tino laughed loudly, burying his head into Henrik's chest and hugging him tightly. "I love you," he managed to say through small gasps. He could feel his throat rasping, and his stomach paining from how much he was cackling. He felt Henrik's hands tighten around his waist, he had such a proud smile on his face, though he couldn't be sure why.

"Love you too," he said.

Tino leaned forward and kissed him, being unable to stop from smiling as he felt Henrik's lips against his. He'd never had anyone like this before; someone who would trust him enough to be so open...It felt nice.

He felt nice.

He loved him more than he'd ever loved anyone before. If he could help it, they'd stay like that forever; arms hugging each other tightly and eyes squeezed shut until they couldn't hold their breath anymore.

They finally broke apart.

“Love you,” Henrik said quickly, like the phrase had been repeating over and over in his head and he couldn’t stand to keep it in anymore.

Tino lifted himself on his toes and kissed him again. “I love you too.”

“Ahem.” Someone cleared their throat across the room. “I thought we were supposed to be cleaning.”

Tino and Henrik leapt off of each other. His face felt like it was on fire, and Henrik wasn’t looking much better. Lukas and Mathias were seen standing in the entryway of the hallway, but just from the way they were standing, Tino could tell that they had been there for a while. Somehow, his face felt like it was even hotter.

“Uh—” he squeaked.

Lukas wore a teasing smirk, watching Henrik as he covered his face in embarrassment.



“...Kitchen needs cleanin’,” he mumbled. He turned on his heels and fled, shoving his hands in his pockets and keeping his head lowered.

“Heh,” Lukas laughed.

Mathias elbowed him a little. “Stop that,” he said.

Lukas snickered again, but said nothing as he too turned and left the scene, going back down the hallway.

“Sorry,” Mathias apologized, scratching the back of his neck.

“Oh! It’s okay!” Tino said, batting his hand, though he turned his head away, waiting for the blush that rested there to leave his face. Quite unusually, there was a beat of silence between them.

“...Can I talk to you for a second?” Mathias asked.

“Of course!” Tino answered immediately.

Mathias sighed and took a couple of steps forward. His head angled down slightly and his hands shoved in his pockets as he kicked a foot up on the wall. Tino quickly joined him at his side.

It was unnerving to see Mathias this down. The guilt must be killing him.

But when Mathias spoke, it wasn’t what he expected.

“...He really loves you, you know,” he said.

His words took Tino by surprise. “Huh? What do you mean?”

“Henrik...” Mathias said, “I’ve never seen him as happy as when he’s with you.”

“Oh.”

Mathias turned his head and met his eyes. “...Please take care of him.”

Tino nodded.

“...I know it’s stupid, but I said something to him when we were kids. And it’s haunted me ever since,” he looked to Tino for support before he continued, “I’m glad you’re around.”

“Me?” Tino asked, his voice raised in confusion. “Why do you say that?”

“Because you proved me wrong,” Mathias said in a low voice.

“I’m sorry,” Tino said, “I don’t understand.”

“You know, in the eleven years I’ve known him, I’ve only ever seen him cry four times.” He brushed a hand through his hair, making a few pieces fall out of place and sit above his eyes. “Four times...”

Tino was unsure what to say, so he wrapped a supportive arm around Mathias’ shoulder in an effort to comfort him.

“The first time was the first day I met him, back in middle school—6th grade. The school had assigned me to show him around. I didn’t understand him back then—and you know how hard to read he is.” Tino nodded, “Anyway, I thought he was just being an asshole. I had no idea he didn’t understand a word I was saying...not until English class.” Mathias sighed and ran a hand through his

hair again, “We had a substitute that day. I don’t think the school told him about Ricky’s situation. Because he picked on him—yelled at him to start paying attention.”

Tino put his hand to his lips. “No,” he breathed.

Mathias nodded solemnly. “He called him to the front of the class—instructions that he only understood because I was gesturing to him—and told him to read from the book... Obviously he couldn’t do it.” A grimace fell on his face. “...Looking back on it now, he was so panicked... so confused... And I couldn’t do anything to help. All I could do was sit and watch while he was yelled at in front of everyone.”

Tino felt his heart wrench at those words, just imagining that...it made him weak with empathy.

“Eventually I couldn’t take it anymore; I stood up and pulled him out of there... It was only when we were alone that he started to cry.” Mathias bit the inside of his cheek. “I kept asking him if he was okay, but he wouldn’t answer me...And then he started talking in Swedish...It was only then that I really understood what happened...I didn’t realize how little English he knew....” He cleared his throat. “After that day—that’s when we became best friends—well—best frenemies I should say...”

Tino nodded, as Mathias continued to speak. “The next time...was my fault. I said I shouldn’t have. something that’s been one of the biggest regrets of my life.”

Tino swallowed, his throat feeling dry. “What was it?”

He looked down, his eyes full of shame and regret as he spoke the words. “Back in 9th grade, I told him he was unloveable.”

Unloveable? Henrik? That was just...completely untrue. He was amazing in pretty much every way; everything about him was incredible. From his gentle demeanor and soft voice to the slight glare that almost always sat on his face—well—any time he wasn’t looking at Tino himself that is. He would’ve been mad at Mathias for saying such a thing if he hadn’t known it was so long ago.

“What?!” Tino exclaimed. He retracted his arm and clutched at his heart, feeling it burn tightly in his chest as he stared over at Mathias. “Why would you say that?!”

“Because I was being stupid...I wanted to fight—wanted to rile him up...But I took it too far...” He looked up and met Tino’s eyes. “...I’m not sure if he’s told you this, but he’s never liked anyone before you.” Tino nodded, and he continued, “I used to make fun of him for that, saying all sorts of stupid shit to get under his skin.” He groaned and shook his head. “So I said the worst thing that came to mind.” He was quiet for a moment, and he sank against the wall he was leaning against. “He didn’t react the way I had wanted him to. Because instead of getting mad and throwing me a couple of punches like he usually did,” He turned his head to the side. “He just had this heartbroken look in his eye.” Mathias shivered and crossed his arms. “I’d never seen him so...hurt. Of course I immediately apologized, but he didn’t want to hear it. He shook his head and left looking as sad as I’d ever seen him. I knew I fucked up that day...It’s one of my biggest regrets.”



“I can understand why,” Tino said sadly.

“He eventually forgave me for it, but it's still something that I think about a lot. I'm just glad I proved myself wrong. Because here you are!” Tino felt himself blush a little, and Mathias chuckled to himself briefly before letting that serious look return to his face.

“Tino,”

“Yes?”

“Thank you for that.”

He wasn't really sure how to respond, but he didn't have to, as Mathias pulled him close into an embrace. It wasn't as strong as his usual hugs—it was much more subdued. Still, he was happy at least that his friend trusted him enough to confide in him, and tightly squeezed him back to make up for Mathias' lack of strength. They pulled apart, and Tino let his hands drop to his sides.

Mathias shook his head again and wiped at his eyes. “Okay, I have one more thing to tell you.”

“Go ahead,” Tino said.

“The fourth and most recent time was back in our sophomore year of college. When Lukas and I wanted to move in together full time.” Tino nodded. “Ricky liked the idea at first, but as time went on things got...” He didn't continue the thought and started on a new sentence. “He couldn't find a roommate willing to stay with him, and he couldn't afford rent on his own either.”

“Oh...” Tino mumbled, “So that's what happened.”

“Yeah,” Mathias sighed, “...And I know he won't admit it, but just from looking at him you could tell he wasn't taking it well. When I'd spend the week at Lukas' house, he didn't look so good.”

“How do you mean?” Tino asked, locking his palms together and squeezing his fingers.

“Well—you know how he is,” Mathias said, “He's got a big heart! ...It shouldn't've been a surprise that he got lonely without me around.” He stood up a big straighter against the wall. “One day, I was coming home from a week at Lukas'—I called into the apartment and said I was home but he didn't greet me, so I went to his room.”

“And?”

Mathias looked to the side. “And he was crying.” Tino put a comforting hand on Mathias' shoulder as he continued. “I didn't know why, and I rushed to his side. But he only said one thing...”

“What was it?”

He sighed and shook his head. “...He asked me why other people were so afraid of him.”

Tino felt his heart shatter in his chest. His throat felt sore and his grip on his hands tightened. “Oh.”

“That was a long day. I think he was just frustrated, because after looking for someone for so long...he couldn't find *anyone*. And I know he just wanted to be out of the way, for Lukas and I, but...” He sighed, running his hands through his hair. “We stopped the search after that.”

Tino let his eyes wander to the kitchen, obviously not being able to see him, but still feeling an incredible pull to be with him at that moment. Hearing such sad stories...it made him want to cherish him and never let go. He would be his, they both would be.

“Thanks for letting him stay with you.”

Tino nodded. “I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

He supposed he could’ve been worried, because if what Mathias was saying was true then that would mean that moving out would be pretty much impossible. But damn it all, they’d figure something out, because he loved him, and whatever they decided to do next, they’d do it together.

Still though, there was something that he couldn’t help but wonder...

“Mathias,” Tino began, “What happened the third time?”

His eyes widened and he put his hands over his chest. “Oh! No!” he said. “I can’t tell you that.” Tino gave him a confused glance before he decided to elaborate. “...He’d probably rather tell you about that situation himself.”

“Oh,” Tino said, “I see.”

Mathias nodded before patting his cheeks with his hands, clearing the negative emotions from his face. “Alright!” he said, “I didn’t mean to get so down, but, as you can tell it’s been a rough day.” Tino nodded and Mathias got up off the wall to hug him once again. This time, it was much warmer.

“Just...please take care of him.”

“I will.”

Mathias squeezed him tightly before letting go again, and without another word, he turned and went down the hallway, leading to what he had said was his room—where Lukas and Emil were helping to clean.

His heart burned in his chest, and he too left the living room, turning around the corner and into the kitchen. It was a simple little place, but as it had been the epicenter of the fire, it was the most burned. Almost everything was completely charred—well, everything that Henrik hadn’t cleaned that is.

He was standing at the back counter of the room, washing it with a sponge with rolled up sleeves. And even though he couldn’t see his face, he just knew that he had that silly little concentrated face as he focused on his work. He really liked it when he looked like that, with his eyebrows furrowed and glare intense as he focused on something. Tino felt a smile press onto his face as he rushed over to him, wrapping his arms around his waist and squeezing him.

“Ah!” he exclaimed, jolting just the tiniest amount as he looked over his shoulder. “Tino?” he asked affectionately.

“I love you,” he said.

He huffed out a small laugh. “Love you too.”

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes



Tino breathed a long sigh of relief as Henrik watched him lean against the door of his room.

“Thank god that’s over,” he said, tilting his head up.

It had taken a very long time to move all of Henrik and Mathias’ things out of the apartment, not to mention how much time it had taken for him and Tino to move his things into the house. Though Henrik knew it was only temporary, it still made him very happy to be living with Tino. If he had to stay somewhere else, he was glad that it could be with him.

Even though there was a guest room, he opted to move into Tino’s room instead. He wasn’t sure how long he was going to stay here, and didn’t want to burden anyone by taking up that space. Not to mention how nice it would be to sleep next to Tino every night. He felt himself smile a little, slightly embarrassed at the flutter in his heart when he thought of it.

He was just wearing a pair of blue jeans, some hiking boots, and a silver cross necklace around his neck. He had taken off his shirt awhile ago, as he had been doing a lot of the heavy lifting, telling Henrik that he could handle the largest boxes as he had brought them in the house. He had definitely been trying to show off. And Henrik didn’t mind in the slightest.



He liked that he was strong. He felt himself blush a little. He liked it a lot. When he had first seen him, he hadn't really thought he'd be that kind of person—someone who could be so independent. He was glad he was though, because Tino didn't need to rely on him all the time. In fact, he could allow himself to rely on Tino too. It really touched him that he had put so much effort into cheering him up... Not many people had done that before.

“Okay,” Tino said, wiping the sweat off his brow and standing up straight, “I’m gonna go check my car. Just gotta be sure we didn’t forget anything.” He turned to open the door.

Henrik stepped forward, feeling himself blush hotly as he looked at the man before him. “Wait.”

“Yes?” Tino asked, his lilac eyes fluttering up to meet him.

“You forgot something.”

“Oh! Did I? I’m sorry, what is it?” Tino asked, turning back to face Henrik.

“Nothin’ much.”

Tino squirmed a little below him. “It’s important if you remembered it, so you should tell me.”

“If you insist,” Henrik mumbled. He leaned down, cupping both of Tino’s cheeks in his hand as he softly kissed the top of his head. “Can’t leave without that.”

“Oh!” Tino said with surprise. He succumbed to a little chuckle, “I should’ve known.”

“Hm,” Henrik said in a quiet puff of a laugh.

Tino pushed himself up on his toes and kissed his cheek. “One for you too then.”

He felt heat softly dapple his cheeks. “Thank you.”

“My pleasure,” Tino said, moving his hands to his shoulders.

By that point, Henrik normally would’ve put his hands on Tino’s waist, but... he was shirtless. He didn’t want to be rude, touching him when he didn’t have that kind of permission. He could feel that flustered expression forming on his face, and he turned his head away.

Tino laughed and leaned in a little, taking his arms off his shoulders and holding Henrik’s hands, placing them at their rightful spot. “You don’t have to be shy, you know,” Tino smiled, “You can touch me wherever you want.”

Somehow, that comment made him blush even more.

“Er—right,” he stuttered.

Tino looked at him questioningly for a moment, before turning bright pink as he seemed to realize the implications of what he just said. “Oh!” he exclaimed “I uh—” he looked to the side for a moment in embarrassment. “You know what I meant.”

“Mm.” Henrik nodded awkwardly.

“Um, anyway, I’m gonna go check those boxes,” he said. Tino turned and left the room, shutting the door with a bit more force than necessary as he rushed away.

Henrik sighed and went over to sit on the bed, looking over at their newly decorated room—with his telescope at the window and his clothes moved into the closet. He knew that it probably wouldn’t stay that way for very long, but his heart still felt incredibly warm. When he had been here before, almost all the surfaces in the room had been somewhat sparsely decorated, with only a couple of family

pictures keeping them populated. Now though, they were very full, because they also displayed Henrik's wood carvings.

He loved seeing their things together like that.

It was almost like they were an old married couple.

He felt his face heat up again.

The two of them...married.

He really liked that.

But who was he kidding, they weren't even boyfriends yet.

He leaned forward and cupped his face in his hands, smiling lightly at the image. Of wedding bells ringing and white doves, of matching rings and black suits, and of all of their friends, watching as they declared their love for each other and sealed it with a kiss. His smile grew brighter when he imagined other things, like holding hands at the altar, and looking into those beautiful lilac eyes as they said their vows, or posing for wedding photos, or picking a destination for their honeymoon...

Where would they go?

Maybe...they could go to Sweden. His heart swelled. He could show him all the wonderful things about his home country...and if they had their wedding in the summer...perhaps they could celebrate Midsummer together. And after that, maybe Tino could show him his own homeland—their nations were neighbors after all.

That would be *perfect*.

Well, anything would be, as long as Tino was there with him.

He was perfect too.

Suddenly, the door rattled slightly, and Henrik snapped out of the fantasy. He could daydream about it another time. He strode over to the door and opened it, revealing Raivis, who stared up at him with moon-like eyes. He was clutching a notebook in one hand and a bottle of vodka in the other.

"Hello," he said.

"Hm," Henrik grunted in greeting.

They stared at each other awkwardly for a moment. Henrik shifted his weight. He supposed it wasn't exactly strange that he was here, it was still early in the evening after all...Still though, he couldn't help but be confused about what he wanted.

"...Tolys is making dinner again...so...come down in twenty minutes."

Henrik nodded, but Raivis didn't leave right away, instead he continued to stare up at him. His cerulean eyes almost felt like they were absorbing him—like they were taking in every aspect of his being and dissecting him. He felt a tiny shiver run up his spine.

"...I'm glad you're feeling better," he said, looking down and tightening his grip around his notebook.

Oh.

“...Thanks,” Henrik said.

Raivis nodded in acknowledgement and though he looked like he had something more he wished to say, he turned away, slipping down the stairs and out of sight. He was strange. It felt like it was almost impossible to read him, but from the way he had been holding that notebook...perhaps it was something to do with that.

It wasn't long before Tino returned again, carrying three large boxes up the stairs and into the room. They looked very heavy, and his heart skipped at the little smirk Tino wore on his face as he pushed his way through the door.

“Lucky I went back down,” he heaved, setting the boxes down in the corner of his room.

He knew he was doing exactly what Tino wanted, but he couldn't help but stare at his body, caked in a light layer of sweat as he used his forearm to wipe his brow.

Tino was usually quite humble...so he knew he was doing this just for him.

And that made him feel really special.

Tino yawned a little and strode over to the bed, collapsing against it and letting his eyes flutter shut.

“I'd say we have about thirty minutes before Tolys is done making dinner.”

Henrik shifted a bit in his spot. “Raivis said twenty.”

Tino shrugged. “Same difference.” He patted the bed next to him, and Henrik moved to sit down.

“I'm really tired from moving all those boxes around,” he sighed.

“That so?”

“Yeah,” Tino said, moving closer to Henrik. “Aren't you tired from working all day too?”

He wasn't really, but he supposed he could play along with whatever he was getting at.

“Mm.”

He moved closer still, and rested his head on his chest. “Let's sleep together.”

Had he heard that right? His face shot a deep red. Was Tino asking what he thought he was? Right now? When they were expected to be somewhere in twenty minutes and all his roommates were home? Not to mention that this would be the first time they would have sex as some kind of couple.

“Uh—” he stuttered.

Tino looked up at him, seemingly confused by his reaction. “What?” he asked. “We've done it before, why are you embarrassed now?” How could he *possibly* think that these two situations were the same. They'd been drunk! But...now they were completely sober.

“...That was under different circumstances,” he croaked.

“Huh? What do you mean? What’s different about now and last night?” he asked. “We slept together then.”

Oh.

His heartbeat soothed, and he coughed out a little laugh. Of course he hadn’t meant it like that. He should’ve realized.

“What?” Tino asked, now even more confused. “What’s so funny?”

He huffed another small laugh. “You shouldn’t phrase it like that,” he said. “Means somethin’ different.”

Tino’s eyes narrowed before they immediately widened again. He turned a bright red. “Oh! I’m sorry! I didn’t mean it like *that*! Oh I did it again!” He looked incredibly embarrassed with flushed cheeks and wide eyes, but his gaze remained on Henrik. “I promise I wouldn’t—I mean—”

“It’s okay,” Henrik said through a small chuckle.

Tino buried his face in his hands before turning around, leaning his back against Henrik’s chest. He remained quiet, mumbling to himself in what must’ve been Finnish for a while before he finally spoke in a language Henrik could understand.

“English sucks.”

“Mm,” Henrik hummed in agreement. He looked at him, so sheepishly embarrassed and in need of comfort... He would happily do that for him, and Tino had given him permission earlier.. He wrapped his arms around him and rested his chin on his shoulder.

He seemed to appreciate the gesture, and leaned back into his embrace.

It was quiet for a while.

“...Still want that nap then?” Henrik asked.

“Ah—no,” he said, “I’m pretty awake now.” He shook his head and pulled Henrik’s arms around him tighter. “But let’s stay just like this.”

“Okay,” Henrik hummed happily.

He’d love that.

They had stayed in each other's arms for far too long, but Tino never wanted to leave. They had been almost completely silent, not needing to say anything to fill the comfortable silence that emanated from them. Had it been long enough that they had known each other that he could start wishing for the more intimate things? Maybe his mind had been so preoccupied with thinking about it, that he’d been saying things without thinking of the implications. This had been the longest he’d ever been involved with the same person, and he was really attached to him. He liked him.

But he was unsure about how to proceed.

What would be the next step?

...Would that be being...*boyfriends*?

He shivered a little against Henrik's warm body.

He'd never had one of those before.

Would he be any good at something like that? He couldn't help but wonder. He'd want to be a good boyfriend to Henrik—the best one possible...but could he trust himself to do that? He'd already failed once. Yes, he'd had sex with him before they were ready... but that was the past. He didn't judge him for what he had told him about his...*history* back in Finland either. He'd relapsed once, and he was determined not to do it again. There were worse things that he hoped he would never have to see.

Tino leaned back against Henrik's body and softly kissed his cheek, an action which made him smile and squeeze him tighter. And seeing him like that...it set his heart ablaze in his chest.

He wanted him, more than water or air.

It was then that he decided something. He wouldn't have him until he could come up with an answer. When they were boyfriends, then he could be his. When he could trust himself to be better, then they could be together.

Hopefully that will be soon.

He loved him so much.

Tino tugged at the cross on his neck, letting the cool metal soothe his racing thoughts. When they were boyfriends, it would be different than every other time, because they would be committed to each other, and their love would be pure and eternal. Then, and only then, would he be able to forgive himself for all his previous mistakes. There was only one problem. How was he supposed to know when the right time to ask was? And how to ask?

There was a light knocking at the door, and the two of them rose from their position on the bed. He knew it would be Eduard, just from the sound of it. He quickly went over to his closet and threw on a new shirt, as well as draping his father's jacket over his shoulders.

"Go ahead and open it, kulta," Tino said as he was readjusting his clothes.

"Mm." He smiled.

"Come on, Tino," Eduard chirped from the other side of the door, as Henrik began to open it. "Tolys made—" He stopped his sentence short and he jumped back a few steps. "Ah!" He let out a sudden shriek.

Tino rushed to the door where Henrik stood, now with a frown as he looked down at Eduard.

"Oh—sorry," he apologized with a bit of a shaky voice. "You startled me."

Henrik's frown grew heavier. He could tell that he was less than content with the situation. It wasn't his fault people were scared of him.

"Um—My name's Eduard—my room's the next one over, and you're uh—," He laughed in an awkward titter, scratching the back of his neck and shifting onto his heels. Maybe he would've remembered his name if he hadn't been so shaken. At least he was trying to be polite. Though, as

Tino knew, it was probably because he wanted to be supportive of his first attempt at some kind of relationship. He could be appreciative of that at least.

“Henrik,” Tino said, glancing up at him.

In all honesty, this was going a bit better than expected.

“Oh—Right, Henrik! That’s right! Sorry, I’m—uh—not great with names.” He was talking quickly, clearly unnerved by him as he continued to ramble. “Uh—you know, Tino’s told me a lot about you —”

“Eduard!” Tino exclaimed, his cheeks flushing hotly.

“What?! It’s true!” he deflected.

The two of them looked up at Henrik, whose sea-green eyes were darting between the two men below him, his lips upturned slightly, once again returning to a happy smile.

“Okay!” Tino said, taking Henrik by the hand and dragging him to the staircase. “Let’s go have dinner. Eduard, what were you saying Tolys made?”

“Cepelinai,” he said, following behind Tino as the three of them descended the stairs.

“Oh, Henrik, I think you’ll love his cooking,” Tino said, squeezing his arm, “He’s an amazing chef.”

“Mm.”

Tino felt a tap on his shoulder and turned to Eduard.

“Why’d he make that face?” Eduard asked in Estonian.

Because of the similarities in their native languages, they were able to understand each other just enough to be able to communicate.

“He makes that face when he’s happy,” Tino replied in Finnish.

Eduard gave him a look that clearly communicated that he didn’t believe him as he once again spoke in his mother tongue. “But it hardly changed!”

Tino rolled his eyes and huffed hotly. Eduard would have to learn how to read him, just like how he, Mathias, Lukas, Emil, and Raivis did.

With time, he was sure they’d get along wonderfully.

Once they had descended the stairs, Tino led them around the corner and to the left, to their dining room table. Tino had spent a long time decorating this room with many Christmas themed decorations, and strung white lights hung from the ceiling and lined the whole room. At the center of the table sat a couple of Santa figurines, and in the corner was a small statue of a goat man.

When they arrived at the table, it had already been set, with Tolys laying out a dish on the table and Raivis setting out plates and silverware—though he wasn’t very effective at it, as he was still clutching a half-empty bottle of vodka in his hand.

Tino didn’t like how much he drank, but it wasn’t his business to stop him.

“Oh, hello,” said Tolys politely. His brown hair was tied up in a ponytail, and he was wearing a light green kitchen apron over a pair of jeans and a white t-shirt. “You’re Henrik right?”

He nodded, and Tolys smiled. “Good to see you.”

They’d seen him around the house before, but this was the first time they were actually having a conversation. Tino scratched the back of his neck. Hopefully, this dinner would go well, and his roommates would learn to understand what Tino saw in him.

“Well, go ahead and help yourself,” Tolys said, “I need to clean up the kitchen a bit, but feel free to start eating.”

The four of them nodded, and Tolys walked out of the room.

Tino was still holding Henrik’s hand, and he squeezed it a little. He could tell he was nervous, so he squeezed it back in encouragement.

Eduard walked out from behind them and sat down across from Raivis, beginning to serve himself. Tino figured that the two of them should do the same, but when he went to sit down he felt a tug on his hand.

“You should sit next to me,” Raivis said to Henrik.

...That was an interesting development.

He’d certainly taken a liking to him.

Henrik glanced at Tino with a small look of anxiety. He squeezed his hand again. It made perfect sense for him to be nervous; there was no doubt about it that he wanted his roommates to like him. It would be an understatement to say that he didn’t easily connect with other people.

...Maybe this could be an exception though.

He let go of his hand and sat down next to Eduard, across from Henrik. From next to him, Raivis sat up on his knees and leaned over the table to serve himself some food. He only put a little on his plate, as he never had much of an appetite. When he was done, he passed it, and it made its rounds around the table before being put back down.

It was very quiet.

Of course he was used to silence with Henrik, but this was different. This was a tense silence much unlike the comfortable ones he shared with him. It felt awkward to say the least. Tino cleared his throat.

“So—winter break,” he said. “Do you guys have any plans?”

“Mm,” Henrik grunted.

Raivis let out a little huff of annoyance. “Unfortunately, a project is going to be requiring my attention for a while.” He didn’t seem to be too enthused about it, as he pulled open the bottle of vodka and took several gulps from it. “...I did get to meet someone though.”

Tolys reentered the room, now without his apron as he sat down at the head of the table. “Oh, you met someone?” he asked, serving himself some food.

“Yes,” Raivis said, putting his head in his hand. “That stranger...”

Eduard puffed out his cheek. “The one you saw?”

He nodded. “He turned out to be important.”

“Well?” Tolys asked. “Who is he?”

“He turned out to be my partner for one of our classes—creative writing,” he said. “His name is Yong Soo.”

“Oh! That’s cool,” Tino said, leaning forward in his seat. “Did you get to talk to him?”

Raivis nodded. “I did. I like him.”

“Aw, well that’s wonderful,” Tolys said. “I’m glad you two get along then.”

“So it sounds like you’re going to be busy,” Eduard teased.

Raivis huffed and drank from his vodka bottle again. “You’re one to talk.”

“Yeah, but *I’m* not going to be busy with that kind of thing,” his tone tinged with repulsion at the very idea, “I’ve got better things to do.”

“And what would that be?” Raivis asked, looking to already know the answer.

“Well—there’s this video game I’ve been playing, and I’m really close to beating it! I’ve been working on it for months, and I think with just a couple more weeks time I can finally do it!”

Raivis let out a little puff of a laugh. “Just like I thought.”

“Yeah and?” Eduard said, “It’s a lot of fun!”

“I agree, video games are pretty great,” Tino said, looking across the table at Henrik, who blushed a little at his words.

Raivis batted his hand once in dismissal, but otherwise said nothing.



Tolys leaned in on the table, smiling softly at the four of them. “You guys are all so lucky,” he said. He looked at Tino and Henrik. “Falling in love.” He turned to Raivis. “Meeting new people.” Finally, he glanced at Eduard. “Having fun.” He breathed a happy little sigh. “It’s nice that you all have such exciting lives.”

“Aw come on Tolys,” Eduard laughed, “Now you’re being all sentimental.”

“I can’t help it,” he said, smiling, “it’s just nice seeing you all so happy.”

Tino much preferred it when he wasn’t drunk. He liked it when Tolys was his sweet and kind, usual self. It was better when they were all friends.

“Well,” Tino said, “is there anything that would make *you* happy?”

Tolys put his hand on his cheek and hummed for a minute in thought. “Well, there is one thing, but I don’t think it’s really worth bringing up.”

“I’m sure it is,” Tino encouraged.

“Yeah, just tell us!” said Eduard.

“No, really.” Tolys brought his hands up and held them out over his chest. “It’s nothing.”

“Come on, Tolys, *please*?” Eduard said.

Tolys shook his head. “You won’t like it.”

“Drop it,” Raivis said, “he doesn’t want to tell us.”

Tino glanced at his hands before looking back to Raivis. “Drop what?”

“But Tolys, we’re your best friends! You can tell us anything!” Eduard begged again.

Tolys sighed and leaned down. “Fine, I guess I can say it, but you all have to promise to listen.”

“Yes!” Eduard cheered.

Tolys bit his lip. “I’d make me really happy if you all...” he looked down to the floor briefly before straightening his back. “If you’d stop saying such mean things about Ivan.”

At the mention of his name, a chorus of discontent sounded throughout the room—one which Tolys seemed to be very displeased with.

“...Ivan Braginsky?” Henrik asked quietly, speaking for the first time.

Tino nodded with a frown. “You know him?”

Henrik shifted in his seat. “Er—yeah. In highschool. Not very well though.”

It was quiet for a moment.

“Tolys...please...don’t tell me you still like him,” Eduard said.

“What?” Tolys asked, raising his voice slightly. “No, not at all! It’s just—you all say such mean things about him...Even if he wasn’t the best boyfriend, he’s still a person! You guys all treat him like he’s this big bad villain who ruined my life!”

“Well can you *blame* us?” Eduard asked. “That relationship was terrible!”

Tino nodded in agreement. Even if he hadn’t been around for the vast majority of Tolys and Ivan’s relationship, he knew one thing for certain. That Tolys was much better off without such an obsessive creep in his life. If he never saw him again, it would be too soon.

“Yes, I know,” Tolys said, “but Ivan is *my* ex-boyfriend, and if we can be on okay terms then I think the rest of you should be too.”

Raivis leaned back and crossed his arms, saying nothing and narrowing his eyes, seeming to dislike the very thought of it.

Tolys shook his head. “Nevermind, I knew I shouldn’t have said anything. It’s fine.”

“I—fine,” Eduard said, clearly annoyed. “I hereby promise that I will try to talk less shit about your horrible ex.”

Tolys narrowed his eyes.

“*Okay, okay*,” Eduard relented, “Ivan Braginsky, I won’t talk shit about Ivan Braginsky.”

“Me too,” Tino said, somewhat begrudgingly.

Raivis said nothing, nodding his head in distasteful agreement.

“Thank you,” Tolys said. He waved his hand in dismissal of the topic, glancing around the table briefly. “Speaking of relationships, how are you two doing?” He gestured to Henrik and Tino.

Henrik glanced over, shyly fiddling with the hem of his shirt. “It’s good,” he mumbled.

“Yeah!” Tino nodded in agreement, “We went ice-skating the other day, it was a lot of fun, right?”

The man across from him nodded.

“Ice skating?” Eduard asked, “What? Did you want to show off your hockey skills or something?” He laughed, much more confidently than before. “You should show him what real skating looks like.”

Tino smiled. “Ice dance?” he asked in a teasing manner.

“Yeah!” He agreed, “It’s much better than all that useless sports nonsense. What do you even do out there? Beat each other up until you get the puck in the goal?”

“Uh—yeah, pretty much.”

The two of them laughed for a bit together before Eduard spoke again.

“Well whatever, we both quit. What does it matter? And I don’t know about you, but I probably couldn’t wake up to get to practice if I wanted to, so it’s a good thing I don’t.” Tino nodded in agreement. He hadn’t quit for that reason, but it was a nice enough excuse.

“I see the rivalry between skaters and hockey players is still there.” Raivis said in a bored monotonous voice.

“We’d die before we let it go, right Tino?” Eduard smiled.

“Right!”

“You used to skate?” Henrik interjected, seeming to be a little nervous—though it didn’t really show on his face.

“Oh yeah!” He said with a nod of his head, “I started as a kid and did it until the end of high school. It was fun—but it took up *way* too much of my free-time, so I quit.”

Henrik said nothing, only nodding a little.

“Do you know how to skate?” Eduard asked.

He shook his head. “Tino taught me.”

“Oh, he’s the best at that!” Tolys said with a laugh.

Tino blushed a little, flustered by the sudden praise but unwilling to interject.

“Remember when you guys taught Raivis and I to skate?” Tolys said.

“And you fell on your ass like fifteen times?” Eduard snickered. “And Raivis got stuck in the middle of the rink and we had to go rescue him?”

That was a fond memory. When the four of them had gone out for a night together to enjoy the weekend. Tolys and Raivis had never skated before, so Eduard and himself had insisted that they take them. They were both horrible at the beginning, and had ended only marginally better. But that was part of the fun, wasn’t it? Tolys, who had been like a fawn on the ice—tripping and falling with weak and feeble legs—could now skate around the rink without assistance. Raivis, on the other hand, still needed help from the wall. He’d get there though.

The table burst into laughter from all except Raivis and Henrik, who both looked at each other in silence. When they were done, Tolys stood and picked up his plate.

“I hope you all enjoyed dinner.” His polite smile returned to his face.

“...It was good,” Henrik mumbled.

Tolys brightened more. “Oh really? I’m glad!” He readjusted in his stance, now holding all the plates in his hands he turned to leave the room. “I’ll be back, just give me a minute.”

Eduard turned to him. “We’re watching a movie tonight, if you’d like to join us. Raivis picked it.”

He felt himself shiver a bit. Raivis had a bad habit of picking really *strange* movies. He could only hope he’d selected something more...subdued than his usual taste.

“What did you pick?” Tino asked, letting a hint of nervousness slip from his voice.

“Loving Vincent,” he replied quietly.

Tino could only thank the lord above that he’d picked a normal movie. He looked to Henrik and lightly tapped his foot under the table to get his attention. He tapped back.

“We’d love to,” Tino said.

And for once, Raivis broke out into a rare sort of smile. It hardly reached his eyes, but it was the most he’d seen in a long time.

He looked across the table at the two people in front of him. They really were more similar than either realized.

The four of them stood up, and Eduard took the remaining plates of food into his hands. “I’m gonna go help Tolys with the dishes,” he said. “I’ll pop some popcorn while I’m there.” He left the room.

Raivis looked up, glancing between Tino and Henrik before going to drink from his vodka bottle again. But he had emptied it, and he looked at it with a sad sigh. “Oh.” He shook it and held it up to his lips, letting any last remaining drops coat his mouth before putting it back down again. “...Need to get a new one,” he mumbled. He stepped out of the room, but not before peeking his head through the doorway.

His cerulean eyes fell on Henrik. “...Thanks.”

He seemed unsure what he was being thanked for, so he gave a confused little nod. Tino wasn’t quite sure either, and though Raivis surely noticed, he didn’t clarify his statement and left the two of them alone.

Henrik reached forward and took Tino's hands in his own. "Think it went well?" he asked.

Tino laughed, tightening his grip and leading him out of the dining room. "Yes," Tino said, leaning on him as they walked over to the couch. "I think that went as well as it could've."

Henrik breathed a sigh of relief as the two of them sat down together. "Good."

Tino wrapped his arm around him, letting his hand brush through his golden blond hair. "...You know, I think they like you."

"...You do?"

"Mhmm," Tino hummed, leaning forward and kissing his cheek. He felt him smile and settle down against him, resting on his shoulder.

"That's," he mumbled, looking up to Tino with an almost awed expression on his face, "nice....very nice."

Tino kissed the top of his head. "I think so too."

Chapter 15

Chapter Notes



Henrik really didn't know what he was so worried about. He knew Tino would say 'yes'. But still, it was embarrassing. He swallowed and fiddled with the bottom of his shirt. Tino had asked him on a date before, so he could do the same for him. It really was ridiculous that he was this nervous about it. Obviously, Tino loved him. And he would *also* love the night he had planned for the two of them. He took a deep breath and stepped outside of the house, looking past Tolys' car to see where his beloved was standing.

It wasn't very cold out, but it's not like the winter weather would've bothered him anyway. Tino was standing at his motorcycle, adjusting this and that—things Henrik didn't understand. He watched him for a moment. He knew a decent amount about cars, but when it came to motorcycles—he was completely clueless. He liked watching him work though. He was very cute when he was focused on something, with those lilac eyes that would narrow so tightly that they were almost shut, and the way he pushed his tongue against his teeth so that it poked out of his mouth slightly. Not to mention how he would tossle his straw blond hair. Henrik blushed. He really liked it when he did that.

Tino was wearing his usual biking clothes—black pants with combat boots, fingerless gloves, and a leather jacket. Though he'd never say it out loud, he really liked it when he was dressed like that. It was completely different from how he normally dressed—these clothes needed to be much tighter than what he usually wore. His regular ensembles consisted of loose and baggy T-shirts that were *far* too big for him. Part of him wondered if he started dressing like that before or after he received his father's jacket. That didn't matter though, because he liked both sides of his fashion sense.

Tino was just...so, so incredibly perfect. He could probably stand there and watch him work for hours—but he knew he couldn't. He was a man on a mission. He sucked in a deep breath, hoping to soothe the little butterflies that fluttered in his stomach.

"Tino," he said quietly.

"Hey, kulta!" Tino smiled happily, "I was just about to take her out for a ride," he patted the seat of his bike. "Wanna come with me?"

He blushed a little at the idea, but shook his head. He had other plans on how to spend the evening.

"Um—wanted to ask you somethin'," he said, going closer to him until he could take his hands in his.

"Oh, sure thing!" he chirped. He was just...incredibly adorable.

"Was wonderin'...if you wanted to..." He clutched Tino's hands tighter in embarrassment, but he didn't look away from him.

"Yes?" Tino asked teasingly.

"...Made a reservation at a local restaurant—if you wanna go with me."

Tino squeezed his hand as he gave a mischievous little smile. "Are you asking me out on a date, Henrik Hellström?"

His face grew hot from the use of his full name, but he answered anyway. "Yes."

"Well I'd be happy to go with you," Tino said. He pulled down on their hands and leaned forward, placing a sweet kiss on his cheek.

"Hm," he hummed in contentment. He knew Tino would say 'yes'. What had he been so worried about?

“Am I allowed to ask anything or is it a surprise?” Tino asked in light teasing.

“Surprise,” Henrik mumbled, “...You’ll find out soon though.”

“Oh really?” Tino smiled, squeezing his hands.

“Mm,” he hummed, “...Should leave soon. So we get there on time.”

“Whatever you say,” Tino replied.

Henrik kissed the top of his head. “Come inside first. Need to show you somethin’.”

“Okay!” he shifted, moving so he could cling onto Henrik’s arm as they walked back into the house.

Henrik couldn’t help but smile as they opened the front door. He could hear Eduard and Tolys chatting in the living room, and knowing him, Raivis was probably there too, quietly listening to their conversation.

“Um—close your eyes,” he said shyly. Tino obliged. He led him over to the kitchen and took a deep breath, letting his body tighten for a moment before relaxing again.

“...You can open them now.”

He heard the sound of Tino’s breath hitching, and felt the loss of his arm on him as he rushed over to the counter.

“You got me flowers?!” he said excitedly, holding up the vase of purple plants that Henrik had bought for him. He had such a happy smile on his face, and his eyes were so crinkled that they hardly looked open at all.

“You like them?”

“I love them!”

And Henrik smiled too, because he loved seeing him like that. It made him even more happy knowing that he was the one who made him react that way. Tino put the vase of flowers down and ran to him, throwing his arms around his neck and assaulting his cheek with kisses.

“Thank you!”

Henrik hugged him tightly in return. “You’re welcome.” His sea-green eyes fluttered shut as he held to him, with his sweet scent of roasted chestnuts and gingerbread. Maybe it was weird, but he loved how much he smelled like Christmas. “Want to know why I got purple flowers?”

He nodded, and the two of them began to rock gently in each other's arms.

“Cause they reminded me of your eyes.”

“Awwww,” two voices sounded from behind them, and Henrik jolted slightly—his grip on Tino tightening as he glanced over his shoulder to see who was behind them. Of course, it was only Tino’s three roommates. His cheeks flushed in intense embarrassment at being caught.

“You guys are so cute,” Tolys cooed from the doorway.

Tino stiffened in his arms, and his face turned a bright red. “Ah!” he exclaimed, looking over his shoulder. “How long have you been standing there?!”

Eduard chuckled to himself, “long enough.” He flicked through his hair, and it sparkled in an almost mocking manner. Raivis, unlike the other two, said nothing, his large eyes taking in the image of them. He clutched his notebook tightly to his chest.

“Go away!” Tino shouted.

“Sheesh, okay, okay,” Eduard laughed. He turned and started to push Raivis and Tolys out of the room. “Have fun on your *date*,” he said with a wink.

As soon as the three of them were gone, Tino melted back into his arms, burying his face in his chest. “Ugh.” Henrik rubbed his back gently. “Sorry about them,” he groaned.

“It’s okay,” Henrik said, though his face was still hot.

But through all of his embarrassment, he was actually quite happy. Because in that short and fleeting moment, one thing had been proved. Something that Tino probably hadn’t even noticed. Tolys and Eduard approved of them. And though he was harder to read—perhaps Raivis did too. He felt his heart surge in his chest. Finally, after all the bad things that had happened in the past, things were looking up.

“Come on, let’s just get out of here,” Tino said, removing himself from Henrik’s arms and replacing them with his hand. “What was the name of the restaurant again?”

“You’ll see,” Henrik mumbled as he and Tino walked toward the door.

“You’re really dedicated to this surprise thing.”

“Mm.”

They were about to step out of the door, but Tino stopped by the coat rack. “Hold on,” he said. He picked up his father’s jacket and laid it over his forearm. “Okay, now we can go.”

Henrik smiled and kissed the top of his head. And then led the two of them out the door and to Tino’s car. Instinctively, he went to the driver’s seat while Tino went to the passenger side. Henrik pushed Tino’s car key (which he always kept in his pocket) into the ignition and started it. Tino, in turn, plugged the aux cord into his phone. Henrik looked down at it for a moment. Somehow, it felt like buying that for him had happened months ago and a week ago at the same time.

Loud heavy metal began to blast out of the speakers, and Tino leaned back in his seat, happily looking over at him. As much of a surprise as it had been for Tino to be a head banging, muscular, classic literature loving, motorcyclist, who was a former firefighter and hockey player, now, he couldn’t see him any other way. He loved him for all that he was.

The car ride wasn’t all that long, it seemed that they were quite lucky, with most of the traffic lights turning green as soon as they arrived at them. Perhaps the universe itself approved of them too, wishing for them to get to their destination as quickly as possible. As always, Tino spent the drive enthusiastically singing along to the loud music—and at the parts where there were no lyrics, he would put his hands up—mimicking an electric guitar.

He was just...so incredibly adorable.

...So perfect.

He was glad he was so enthusiastic about the music too, as he had an extra special surprise that would await him after their dinner together.

When they arrived at the restaurant they walked inside arm in arm. The location he had picked was a Chinese place called ‘The Lucky Dragon’ which was known for being a great gathering place for gay and lesbian couples, as well as having incredible food. Even though they lived in California, and to find someone who would be openly hostile to them would be rare, he’d still like to avoid any stares. Well—any more than he was used to anyway.

The interior of the restaurant was a bright red, with yellow lanterns that were suspended from the ceiling. Tino and Henrik stopped behind a podium—where they would wait to be seated. As they did so they looked around the rest of the building. There were many people inside—including a few gay couples, though he didn’t recognize any of them. Well, all except for one person.

Arthur Kirkland, who was dressed in a green sweater vest and khaki pants. It was a strikingly different ensemble than what he’d seen him in the other day—not to mention the cloak he usually wore at Lukas’ house. He’d have doubted that they were the same person if it hadn’t been for his...incredibly *distinct* eyebrows.

He was sitting with someone who looked a little familiar. He had long blond hair that was tied back into a little ponytail. Had he seen him before? Possibly? He wasn’t sure. He knew a lot of people with blond hair. And then it hit him; the barista from the coffee shop! They were sharing a table together near the center of the restaurant.

...Perhaps they did like each other.

The walls of the restaurant were decorated with ornate and beautiful paintings of dragons, depicted with the number 8. They were so detailed...they looked like they had been created entirely by hand.

“Oh wow,” Tino breathed in amazement. “Those are beautiful.”

“Ah! I’m glad you like them! My little brother painted them.” A proud voice came from their right, and Tino and Henrik turned to face it. It had come from a short Asian man with dark brown hair that was tied up into a high ponytail. His eyes were a pretty golden brown. He was dressed nicely, but he didn’t look like a waiter. “My name is Yao; welcome to my restaurant.”

“Nice to meet you,” Tino said politely.

Yao nodded in acknowledgement before looking around briefly, “Aiyah—where is he? He should be seating you...” He shook his head and let out a little huff, “Kids.” He looked up to meet their eyes, and though he took a slight step back when he met Henrik’s he didn’t show any sign of fear on his face. “Why don’t I show you to your table? What’s the name of your reservation?”

“Hellström. For 6 o’ clock,” Henrik said.

“Ah, I remember that one,” Yao said to himself. He picked up two menus from the podium, and waved with his hand for the two of them to follow him onto the restaurant floor. He led them around to the back, picking a private table in the corner for the two of them to share. Tino and Henrik sat down, and Yao placed the menus in front of them.

“I hope you enjoy your time here at The Lucky Dragon,” Yao said. He gave Henrik a little wink, and then turned, going back to the front of the restaurant.

“Did you request a table by the back just so we could be alone together?” Tino asked shyly.

Henrik nodded, awkward and flustered but trying not to show it.

He felt Tino tap his foot under the table. “You’re just the sweetest.”

Henrik felt his face heat, and he reached across the table, taking Tino’s hand, and before he could really process what he was doing, he brought it to his lips and kissed it.

“What are you doing?” Tino laughed, his face turning pink in an endearingly bemused sort of expression.

“...Tellin’ you ‘I love you’,” Henrik mumbled.

Tino smiled, “Can I tell that to you too?”

Henrik blushed and nodded. Tino kissed his hand in return. There wasn’t a person in the universe that he’d rather have; even if some divine being crafted the perfect man for him, he wouldn’t want him. Because Tino was right here, and he was all he needed.

After a bit of looking at the menu, they had both decided on what they wanted. Tino with the peking duck bowl, and Henrik with the chicken fried rice. The menu was incredibly large, and Henrik had to wonder how they managed to be able to serve so many different kinds of food. After a while of waiting, they were greeted by who Henrik assumed would be their waiter for the evening. He was tall with sleek black hair and a white button up. He had a dark half-apron around his waist and held a circular tray in his hand. Most interestingly, he had two earrings in, one being a simple silver stud, and the other an ear cuff with several chains hanging off of it.

“Hi!” came his cheerful greeting, “I’m Yong Soo, and I’ll be your waiter for tonight! Can I get you anything to start off your evening?” He wore a charming little smile on his face. Yong Soo...that name was a little familiar, had he heard it before?

“Wait!” Tino exclaimed, “Do you go to HWU?”

“Mhmm,” he nodded enthusiastically, “I’m a creative writing major!”

“Oh my God,” Tino said excitedly, “Are you Raivis’ project partner? Raivis Galante?”

“Raivis Galante...” he repeated, “Oh yeah!” he laughed, “That guy’s a real riot!” Henrik wasn’t sure *he’d* refer to him like that but then again...what did he know?

“That’s so crazy,” Tino said, “I’m his roommate, he was just telling us about you the other night, you guys have some project you’re working on?”

He glanced over to Henrik, and his stance straightened a bit. “...Really?” Yong Soo asked. He looked a bit taken aback, before he returned to his senses. “But yeah—I won’t bore you with the details, but we’re writing a little novella together. He’s been great so far, but sometimes I wish he’d let loose a little bit.”

“That sounds like Raivis,” Tino laughed. He seemed extremely interested in him, probably because he was desperate to know what drew Raivis to him. Henrik could feel himself wondering about that too,

but not about Yong Soo...

Yong Soo put his hand to his chin for a moment, perhaps in thought before he shrugged. "Oh well," he laughed, "anyway, what can I get for you this evening?"

"We'll have the peking duck bowl for me and the chicken fried rice for him," Tino said, gesturing across the table to Henrik.

"Anything to drink?" he asked, pulling out a little notepad from his apron and scribbling on it.

"Water is fine."

Yong Soo gave a little two fingered salute. "Alright then, I'll be back soon!" He put the notepad away and then walked off.

"That's so crazy!" Tino said excitedly. "What a small world!"

"Mm," Henrik nodded in agreement. He looked back to the walls of the restaurant, and took in the beauty of the dragons that were displayed there. He could hardly believe that only one person had painted every single one. He could only imagine how long that took.

Yong Soo returned shortly with two glasses of water.

"Here you are," he smiled, setting them down on the table.

"...Yong Soo," Henrik began with his question. Their waiter jolted slightly, but an easygoing smile filled his face. "...You know who painted those?"

"Oh!" His smile grew significantly bigger, "I did!"

"Wait, really?!" Tino exclaimed.

"Yup! Took me all summer!" He laughed and turned his head, letting his honey brown eyes fall over the painting behind him.

"They're incredible!"

"Thank you," he said, scratching the back of his neck. He looked to be quite happy with the amount of praise he was receiving as his eyes were squeezed shut with prideful joy. "My um," he hesitated, like he was unsure how to describe his relation to him, "*brother*, had me make them special for him—so they looked like a couple of drawings he made. Of course I took some liberties but..." He opened his eyes again and smiled. "I'm really happy with how they turned out."

"...You did a good job," Henrik decided to say.

"Thank you," he said again. "Anyway, your food should be ready shortly, so don't go anywhere!" He turned on his heels and left them, going back into the kitchen.

"Ah, now I get it," Tino said.

"Hm? Get what?"

"Why Raivis likes him."

Henrik was silent as he waited for him to speak again.

“He’s an artist! It makes perfect sense!”

Henrik furrowed his eyebrows in confusion. “Why?”

“Because he’s a poet, so of course he’d be drawn to someone who can paint—someone who can visualize art and make it into something....” he paused, trying to think of the word, “...tangible.” He pronounced it wrong, but Henrik still understood his point. He wasn’t quite sure he followed that logic, but if it made sense to Tino then he supposed he wouldn’t argue.

“Speaking of which, you should ask if you can read some of his poetry sometime, I’m sure you’d like it.”

“Why’s that?” Henrik asked.

“Well, he hardly ever shares it with anyone—even Eduard, Tolys, and I... and he seems to have taken a liking to you.”

“You think?”

“I know.” Tino replied confidently.

“Why me?”

Tino shook his head. “No idea, but I wouldn’t take it for granted. He doesn’t trust people very easily.”

“Oh,” Henrik said. Even Tino had no idea what drew Raivis to him...how mysterious was that?

“But enough about him,” Tino said with a bat of his hand. “Tonight’s supposed to be about us.” He leaned forward in his seat, his eyes glinting in a playful manner.

Henrik blushed a little and laced their fingers together across the table. “Right,” he said.

“Do we have any other plans after this?” Tino asked with a mischievous smile.

“...Maybe,” Henrik said, taking his eyes off him for a moment.

“Oh really?”

“Can’t tell you though. It’s a surprise.”

“Guess I’ll just have to wait and see then.”

“Mm,” Henrik hummed shyly.

They were quiet for a while, lovingly staring into each other’s eyes before Tino eventually spoke again.

“...Kulta?”

“Hm?”

“This sounds silly but...do you ever miss your home country?”

What a complex little question he had asked. Of course he missed it. It was somewhere he imagined himself when he was hurting, or somewhere he went when he was fantasizing about wistful things.

But...when it came to the reality of it, there were certain things that kept him here in America. Henrik gave a slight nod. "A lot. Missed it more when I was young, but...couldn't imagine going back now."

"Really? Why not?" he asked.

Henrik shook his head. "It's embarrassin'," he muttered, his cheeks flushing hotly.

"You can tell me!" Tino said encouragingly. "I promise I won't judge you."

"It's—um..."

He was saved from having to answer by Yong Soo, who—seemingly appearing out of nowhere—placed their food down in front of them.

"One peking duck, and one chicken fried rice." He flicked a hand through his hair. "I hope you enjoy—oh—and flag me down if you need anything!" He seemed to be in quite a hurry as he rushed off again.

Henrik looked down at his plate, to see that he'd been served the wrong dish. That guy wasn't the most organized.

"Oh, I have yours," Tino laughed, picking up the plate and holding out his hand for Henrik to hand him the bowl in front of him. He did so, and the two of them switched.

"So, what were you saying?"

Henrik swallowed, he supposed there was no getting around it. "Don't wanna go back 'cause... I couldn't imagine leavin' Mathias, Lukas, Emil...and..." he paused, feeling his face turn incredibly hot as he looked to the side, "...and you." Tino looked shocked, and his face turned a bright pink.

"...You really mean that?"

Henrik nodded, "Mm." As much as he'd love to go back to Sweden, his life wouldn't be the same without his little family here—and he wasn't referring to his parents, as much as the thought pained him.

"You know... I think I feel the same way," Tino said. "I'll go back to Finland someday...but not right now." Tino seemed to have a lot of weird feelings about his homeland. It was strange to him, because when he spoke about being from there, he did so with such pride, but when it came to actually going back there...he seemed hesitant.

"Ever thought about visitin'?" he asked.

Tino vigorously shook his head. "Oh—no. I couldn't—not right now at least. It's too expensive—and the whole thing is so complicated—it's just not worth it, not when there's other things I'd rather be doing."

"Like what?"

"Like sitting here, and eating dinner with you."

Henrik felt himself blush. "Oh."

Tino stared at him a while, those lilac eyes studying him with amazement, joy, and gratitude. He didn't say anything, communicating everything in his mind through his expressions alone. They didn't need words, not when it was all too clear.

I love you.

They ate mostly in silence, with Tino occasionally pausing to remark on how delicious the food was and how happy he was that they had come here. He couldn't've been more grateful. It had all gone perfectly. How could it not? A perfect date for his perfect partner...

When Yong Soo came to collect their plates he was very happy to see that they had eaten everything—and remarked that they must've enjoyed their food a lot. And even though he wasn't the *best* waiter in the world, Henrik was sure to tip him well. Tino clung to his arm as they exited the restaurant. The sky had darkened and it was now colder outside—their breaths coming out in little puffs of steam as they walked over to Tino's car. The parking lot was very populated at the front, but as they walked to where their vehicle was, the cars thinned out more and more. They were of all size and color, with the light of the moon reflecting off their tops and lighting the path ahead.

"Thank you so much for taking me out like this, it was really nice."

"You're welcome," Henrik said, squeezing Tino's hand in his. "Perfect night."

Tino stumbled a bit in his step. "Perfect?" he repeated.

"Mm," Henrik hummed, "perfect."

"Oh," Tino said, suddenly seeming to get a bit nervous as he scratched the back of his neck. "There are better words, don't you think? Like, 'great', or 'fun', or 'wonderful'. Those are all such nice words."

Henrik blinked at him. "Perfect is a good word."

"Yeah, I guess," Tino muttered, "But it's kind of..." he faltered, seeming unable to come up with a justification for his thoughts. He grabbed at the cross around his neck. "Heavy?"

Henrik glanced at him before turning his head to look at the parking lot ahead. What was he talking about? Was he saying he didn't have a good time? Had he fallen short? He frowned.

"Did you not have fun?"

"No! No!" Tino immediately reassured him, stopping in his tracks and waving his hands frantically. "Trust me—I did! I mean it, I had a lot of fun!" Tino knotted his hands together, the pendent still buried within them like he was praying. "I just—I don't like that word. It's not—I mean—,"

Henrik blinked at him again, looking down at the man beside him. "Why not?"

"I—because—,"

Was he uncomfortable? Was *he* making him uncomfortable? Henrik pulled at the collar of his shirt, suddenly feeling anxious. He began to fiddle with his hands, glancing between Tino and the car they still had yet to arrive at. Was there a way he could make this better? Was he just insecure—that he wasn't as great as Henrik thought he was? He had no idea. This entire conversation was incredibly uncomfortable and he just wanted things to go back to how they were before.

“You’re perfect,” Henrik said.

Tino tensed.

A cold breeze shifted between them. Tino shivered, breathing through the tips of his fingers before he suddenly began to start walking again.

Henrik followed after him, the silence heavy between them. It was like a thick blanket had come around them, impossible to pierce by anything but the man who was currently refusing to speak. Was he upset? Well, obviously—he knew that much—but about what? Had he said the wrong thing? What would make him feel better? He had no idea, and seemed to only be capable of digging himself further and further into this hole he wished he could pull himself out of.

“Um—,” Henrik mumbled, reaching out his hand to take Tino’s, “You’ve always been to me.”

Tino ignored him, walking quicker towards the car as he shoved his hands in his pockets.

“I—uh—,” he stuttered, moving his hand back. “I thought that for a long time.”

“Henrik,” Tino said sharply, “stop.” He was shaking slightly, and as much as Henrik wanted to make sure he was okay, he made no attempt to get close to him. If he wanted something he would ask for it, and it looked like he was in no mood to request such a thing. Instead, he shut his mouth, desperate to get into his good graces again. When the two of them got to the car, Tino only opened the passenger side, not even bothering to step in. His shaking had grown worse, and he was trembling so much it was almost impossible for him to take off the jacket he was wearing.

“Um—Are you cold?” Henrik asked.

Tino shook his head, throwing his father’s coat over his shoulders, replacing the leather one that he had been wearing. His shaking hands reached into the car and he opened the glove box, stuffing something into the pockets.

“I’m sorry,” Tino stuttered, seeming unable to look him in the eyes. “I need a break.” A break from what? Being here with him? Or did that mean being with him—at all? “Just—give me five minutes. Sorry, I’m really overwhelmed right now.” he said over his shoulder, already rushing away. Henrik didn’t even attempt to stop him, watching as he pulled something out of his pocket.

Click. Click. Click.

A small jittering fire burst forth from within Tino’s hands as he struggled to hold a flame from a lighter. There was stillness for a moment, before he saw a pack of cigarettes, and the black smog that filled the air behind him. Henrik followed him with his eyes, watching the little red dot of his cigarette as he sat down at the edge of the parking lot, where the reflection of the traffic lights bathed him in green. Tino never stopped shaking, trembling as he took in each new bout of smoke.

He’d never seen him smoke before. The scent of it never lingered in Tino’s mouth when they kissed. His heart felt like lead in his chest. Was it something he was ashamed of? He hoped Tino would be comfortable enough with him to tell him something like that. How often did he do it? He had fumbled with the lighter, obviously struggling to use it. Perhaps it was because he was shaking so much, but an experienced smoker probably would’ve been able to use it like second nature... He felt heavy at the implication. Henrik leaned against the car, his mind racing but his body remaining entirely still. He thought back on all the time he had known Tino. He’d never seen him smoke—at least not in the year

and a half he had known him—though granted a lot of that time they had merely been strangers. But still—in all that time, he'd never once seen him with a cigarette.

...Had he really not touched one for all that time? He put his head in his hands and leaned over. This wasn't supposed to happen. He had just wanted to tell him that he loved him, and that he had enjoyed their night out together. He hadn't meant for it to all spiral like this. What had happened? He thought on it for a moment, ruminating on what had just transpired. Everything had gone wrong in the parking lot. As soon as he'd said the word 'perfect'. Was that it? Was such a small word like that enough to make Tino so upset? Henrik wasn't sure he understood. But regardless, that didn't really matter. He didn't need to understand to realize that he'd hurt him.

Honestly, who'd want to be called 'perfect' in the first place. Who'd want to be so highly regarded that they were seen as unreachable by everyone else—to be removed from the earthly world and judged as something inherently inhuman because of their flawlessness. The pressure of such a status could be enough to crush someone. He should have just stopped at the first use of it. Because who on *Earth* would want to be called perfect?

Henrik thought back to that day at the library—back to their first date that they had together. He supposed he really was like Gatsby.

Because Tino wasn't some perfect little doll, he was a person. A person who could get mad and scream and cry—a person who was bound to make mistakes and slip up. He was a human being, just like he was. Tino wasn't perfect. He was no better than him and vice versa. They were supposed to be equals. But that's something that becomes hard to do after so much idolization. He looked up to the stars for comfort, hoping to find some aspect of help in them—but he found none. Because now...they just reminded him of Tino. He sighed and shook his head.

And now, he was sitting at the edge of the parking lot, smoking a cigarette for what was probably the first time in at least a year. It didn't matter if he hadn't meant to hurt him. He did. And now, it was up to him to fix that. All he could do was hope that he wouldn't be upset enough to end whatever it was that they had together.

Henrik let his hands drop and cleaned his glasses with his shirt, breathing in a steep breath as he placed them back on his face and looked over to where Tino was sitting at the edge of the parking lot. He was shaking slightly, but it didn't look like it was from panic or cold. He was definitely crying.

His chest heaved at the sight. Henrik straightened his back and started walking over to him. He would apologize and make things right. He would tell Tino he was sorry, and that everything was his fault. All that mattered was that he felt better, because tonight was supposed to have been an amazing date for the two of them; a night that Tino surely would've loved if it hadn't been for his own idiocy.

He was determined to make things right, for both of their sakes.

The air was silent when Henrik arrived by Tino's side. He sat down, biting his tongue, as the green abyss surrounded them. The traffic light from where it was coming from seemed to be broken. Gone was Tino's scent of gingerbread cookies and roasted chestnuts, instead it was replaced by the ashy chemical stench of stale death. It was overwhelming, but Henrik stayed there anyway.



“I’m sorry, Tino,” Henrik said. “I shouldn’t’ve done that.”

He was quiet next to him, sobbing silent tears as he puffed away at his cigarette. This silence wasn’t pleasant like all the ones they had shared before. This one was terrible, and tense, and awkward, and he just wished it would be over so that they could be together again. Well, if Tino wanted that... he only hoped he still would. He wanted so desperately for their fighting to be over. He had hurt him so badly...all he wanted was reconciliation. He began to fumble with the end of his shirt, feeling the intense need to do something that would occupy his hands.

“Should’ve listened to you—stopped when you asked me to—not called you that.”

Tino leaned his head against his shoulder, tears still streaming down his face.

Henrik let out a quiet sigh of relief. Forgiveness. The silence between them felt indefinite as the stars twinkled down above them. Neither one even tried to break it. Tino didn’t look at him, instead he leaned in closer, still puffing away at his cigarette as he pulled Henrik’s arm around him in an embrace. He quickly obliged. He would do anything to make him feel better.

“...I’m sorry,” Tino croaked.

“What for?” Henrik asked immediately.

“...I didn’t want you to see me like this.”

“Like what?”

“Like this!” he exclaimed in frustration, throwing his hands up in the air. “...I never wanted you to see me smoke...” He tugged his father’s jacket tighter around him—not from the cold weather outside, but perhaps in some kind of self-comforting effort. Henrik squeezed him in his arms.

“I don’t judge you.”

“That’s not the point,” he mumbled, running his hand through his hair. Henrik looked at him. “The point is that I didn’t want you to see it.”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s disgusting!” he shouted. “It’s terrible—and something I should’ve left behind a long time ago. But of course—I had to relapse—because I always fucking do. I just can’t help myself!” He sighed and shook his head.

An immense amount of guilt weighed on him. Did he really feel this way? His heart tightened in his chest. “I’m sorry,” he apologized again, “It’s my fault.”

Tino turned and met his eyes, pure lilac that contained so much emotion that they were almost impossible to decipher. “Don’t blame yourself for my shitty behavior. You’re not the one who lit it.” He brought it to his lips and puffed at it again. That was true. He couldn’t argue with it. He hadn’t been the one to light it. But his heart still burned like he did. The quiet returned. It was still sharp and uncomfortable—but less so then it had been before.

“...I need to tell you something—something I should’ve told you a while ago.”

Henrik said nothing, only glancing over at him.

“You—deserve to know why I left Finland.” He looked so sad—so defeated...so heartbroken. He was finally ready to answer the question Henrik had wondered about for so long. He squeezed him tightly, in encouragement.

“...I was really close to my father...He trained me up from when I was a kid—taught me everything I know. We would spend countless weekends together—where he’d come to every one of my hockey practices—cheering me on from the sidelines—and afterwards we’d get salmiakki and just talk for hours. After school—he’d take me down to the fire station, and show me off to all his coworkers, telling them how proud he was of me and saying I was the best kid he could ask for.” He started to tear up again, but he wiped them away with his sleeve. “He always bragged that I was going to be—to be the best—firefighter the world had ever seen. He said, I was his—his ‘*perfect*’ kid...” His sniffing was growing harder, and he brought his cigarette back to his lips. “...And then he was gone. He’d always said he was fine—blaming his physical decline on his age. I’d believed him then—he *was* getting older. But I’d been too stupid to see it. I don’t know what caused it—maybe it was just some freak accident...” he paused and took in the smoke of his cigarette again. “He died of a heart attack when I was at school.” His tone raised again and his eyes flashed, almost like he was reliving a memory he desperately wanted to leave buried. Henrik didn’t ask, only hugging him closer as the tears poured out of Tino’s eyes. “During his funeral, it didn’t feel real. I stood there, with my mother and grandfather by my side, unable to even muster a tear because I couldn’t process that he was really *gone*.”

“I’m sorry,” were the only words he could muster.

But Tino wasn't finished, sniffing as he continued.

"People thought he was a hero, you know? He saved countless lives—protecting people, animals, property...And my grandfather before him—he was a veteran in a war to defend my homeland! And who am I? Their descendant. Everyone back home thought I would be the next in line for some honorable legacy—they *expected* it of me—like *I* could live up to *that*. Hell, my last name is *Väinämöinen*, after the folk hero and demigod!" There was a brief pause in his words. "So who was I? *I* was his *perfect* little son, so of course, it was only logical." He said the word with such unexpected malice, like it was a weapon capable of wounding him beyond his ability to recover. "The next few months were a blur—I threw myself into everything I could. I worked hard in school, spent *hours* at the fire station to train and, with how hard I'd been practicing, I was well on my way to becoming the captain of the hockey team for my senior year." he trailed off and took in his cigarette again. "Of course that didn't last. The people around me kept asking if I was okay, and I'd always nod and say I was. It was a lie. I was using it all as a front—throwing myself into activities to distract myself from my grief. It worked for a while but..." he closed his eyes and shook his head. "One day I just couldn't do it anymore. The day that it finally hit that my father was gone...*forever*... I didn't take it well. I stopped doing school work, stopped going to the fire station, quit the hockey team. It all hurt too much. Instead I—I started going out every night to party. I was drunk almost all the time, I needed something—anything—to relieve the pain I was feeling. I'd have sex with any guy that was willing to have me—I picked up smoking too." He lowered his eyes in shame. "Those were some of the worst years of my life." He ran a hand through his hair. "And to think that his *perfect* little son was doing such shameful things... He wouldn't've wanted that. He wanted me to do what I had been! A good student, the captain of the hockey team..." More heavy tears rolled out of his eyes. "A firefighter... And what did I become instead? Some teenager with an addiction to sex and cigarettes!" he muttered angrily, wiping his eyes with his sleeve. "...I wonder if he would've been disappointed in me..."



“He wouldn’t,” Henrik said, reassuringly rubbing his back. He had no idea if that was true, but that didn’t matter. He needed to be a comfort to him right now.

Tino ignored the comment and moved on.

“...Eventually I couldn’t take it anymore. My grandfather could tell how much everything was affecting me. He could tell I wasn’t happy. Who would be? After spending years like that...He told me I should consider looking at different universities to go to—so that I could study somewhere else and leave it all behind... I don’t think he intended for me to take his advice so far... But after so much

partying and bad memories... I didn't want to stay in Finland anymore—I needed to get away—it all hurt too much. HWU has huge scholarships for international students, you know? It was a good opportunity, and I just needed to get out of there as fast as I could.” He sniffed and held Henrik’s arms around him. “And so that’s why I left.”

Henrik’s heart surged with sympathy at his tale, and he could do nothing but hold him close. Tino finished off the last of his cigarette with a puff and threw it onto the asphalt. He sneered at it, stomping it out aggressively with his foot until he didn’t look angry anymore. Instead, he just looked sad, like a drooping flower unable to get sunlight from underneath a larger tree.

“I’m sorry that happened,” Henrik said.

“It’s alright,” Tino replied, wiping his eyes for a final time. “It’s all the past now...”

“How long ago was that?”

“The end of my junior year of high school,” Tino said, “When I was seventeen.”

“Seventeen?!” Henrik repeated in shock that he knew wouldn’t appear on his face. He had said that his father died ‘a long time ago’. Five years was certainly not a very long time, especially if it was concerning the death of a parent.

“...Yeah,” Tino said sadly. “...I’m sorry—I lied. I just...didn’t want to talk about any of this back then.”

That at least, he could understand. He nodded, and it was quiet again for a moment.

“...You did a good thing,” Henrik decided to say.

“What?”

“You left. You knew you couldn’t take it. You did what would make you feel better.”

“...I guess,” Tino muttered.

It was quiet again.

“Tino?”

“Yes?”

“...How often do you...”

“Almost never,” he responded sadly. “I was eight months clean.”

Henrik hugged him. “I’m sorry.”

Tino shrugged and leaned in on him. “It’s okay,” he said. “All a part of the process, I guess...”

“Mm.”

“...Please don’t tell me you feel guilty about it.” Tino muttered.

Henrik sighed, “Can’t help it.”

Tino shifted, and cupped Henrik's face in his hands. "Don't," he said, "It's not your fault—and we've had enough fighting tonight."

He nodded, and they rested their foreheads against each other's.

"...You know," Tino hummed quietly, "it's funny that you thought I was so perfect."

"Hm?"

Tino lifted his head back and traced his hand over the scar on Henrik's forehead. "Because one of my biggest mistakes is sitting right here."

"Not a mistake," Henrik said firmly.

"Why not?"

"Cause you saved my life."

Tino frowned, and started to brush through Henrik's hair as he looked at the scar. "But don't you hate that it's there?"

"No." He couldn't lie.

"Really?" he asked in surprise.

"Mm," he grunted, "Got many scars...but...got this one 'cause you cared enough to save me." All of those other ones—all of those other little marks on his body. They were given to him when he and Mathias would fight. When they'd punch, and kick and scratch at each other until one of them couldn't anymore. It happened over and over. He had lots of scars from him. Mathias had many more. Sometimes he wished they weren't there, because they were a permanent reminder of such a tumultuous past. But he never wished to be rid of the mark on his forehead. Because he didn't get it from a fight. He had gotten it because Tino had cared enough about him to drag him out of that fire—whether that was a simple act of saving him or one of love he didn't know. But that didn't matter, because he loved that mark.

Tino's eyes softened, and he leaned forward and hugged him. "Oh, kulta..."

And just like nothing had ever happened between them, they were back to how they usually were. They stood, and Tino lovingly kissed his cheek and Henrik moved his hands to his hips. The two of them began to sway softly, the green light illuminating their faces in the darkness. Tino wrapped his arms around Henrik's neck, sea-green meeting soft lilac as their eyes locked together.

And somehow, almost like magic, the green lights from the traffic light finally changed—turning instead to a bright yellow.

"I love you," Tino said.

"Love you too." And just looking at him like that. When he had been so vulnerable before, now looking at him so lovingly. He wanted them to belong to each other, and each other alone. So much that he couldn't stand it anymore. He had to risk it, because if this wasn't the time, he didn't know when it would be. He bit down on his tongue.

"Tino?"

“Yes?”

He took a deep breath, feeling his heart pounding as he looked at the beautiful face in front of him. His throat was dry and his head felt light—but he continued anyway.

“Will you be my boyfriend?”

“What?!” Tino exclaimed, taken so off guard that his thick accent slipped through. He took a half step back with wide eyes as he stared up at Henrik. “Boyfriends?!”

“Only if you want.” Henrik quickly reassured, but it didn’t seem that he was concerned about that.

“...You still want to be with me, after everything that happened tonight...?” He put his hands behind his back and looked to the floor.

“Yes,” Henrik answered immediately. He pushed Tino’s chin up so that their eyes met again.

“Really?”

“Mm.”

The past was the past. It couldn’t be changed. They’d both made mistakes—and that was something that they’d have to live with. Some things were worse than others, but ultimately, if they could see each other’s worst sides and still love each other...that would be enough.

Tino looked at him a bit shyly. “...I’ve never had a boyfriend before.”

“Me neither.”

It was quiet, and they stared into each other's eyes. Henrik’s heart was soaring in his chest, flying high above him and being tossed through the air as he waited for Tino’s answer. Maybe it was rash of him to ask, but he couldn’t stand waiting any more. He needed an answer—more than air. Even if he said ‘no’, that would be *something*. But right now, he just wanted him. He didn’t care about his past.

Tino wasn’t perfect; he had made a lot of mistakes.

But damn it all he was amazing.

He was amazing and wonderful and jaw-dropping and stunning and—Henrik cut his thoughts off, because he knew he would probably go on forever. Tino was—in every sense of the word—beautiful.

“Let’s do it,” Tino said, reaching forward and grabbing his hands. “Let’s be boyfriends.”

And Henrik smiled, he smiled so brightly that his teeth shone, that his eyes crinkled shut and that his cheeks were pushed out. Because Tino had said ‘yes’, and now they were officially together. After all this time. He couldn’t help himself, grabbing Tino by the waist and holding him up in the air, spinning him around until he was dizzy and felt like he might collapse. Because Tino loved him, and everything was okay again.

“Ah! Kulta!” Tino laughed, finally free of that tension that had been wrapped around him so tightly before. He sounded joyful.

As Henrik lowered him to the ground, Tino wrapped his legs around his waist. He put his hands on his cheeks, as if to kiss him—but he stopped.

“What’s wrong?” Henrik asked, moving one of his hands up to run through his straw blond hair.

“My lips—” Tino said, “They’ll taste like smoke.”



Henrik scoffed, "Don't care."

And as much as that taste reminded him of the past, he leaned forward and kissed him anyway.

Tino's body surged with excitement, and he squeezed Henrik's hand. His *boyfriend* kept his eyes on the road, but returned the gesture, keeping one hand on the wheel as he stared ahead. He looked so happy—so happy that Tino was sure that the untrained eye could see it on his face, with red cheeks and crinkled eyes; surely, anyone was able to tell how much he loved him. There was no more yelling, no more tears, no more apologies. They had left that behind them as they headed out onto the distant road.

When the two of them had piled back into the car, Henrik had been very insistent that they listen to Metallica. He thought it was a bit strange but decided not to question it. He was hardly ever insistent about anything—so he happily complied. He'd do anything his *boyfriend* wished.

Because Henrik was his, and they belonged to each other. Because Henrik didn't care that he was a smoker, or that he had messed around a lot as a teenager. He loved him just the same as before he had known that, and he hadn't been upset when he had finally told him.

It felt nice to be loved, to be cherished like that.

He had no idea where Henrik was taking them—all he knew was that it was a surprise that was just for him. Something to close out their night with a *bang*. He began to bounce his leg, in an attempt to get rid of all the butterflies in his stomach.

"Excited?" Henrik asked, squeezing his hand.

"Yup!" Tino nodded, returning the gesture.

If Henrik had planned such a nice dinner for him, he could only wonder what else lie in store for them tonight. Perhaps others would've considered the night tainted after all that had happened tonight—but not Tino. Because—yes—their fight had been nasty—but they were open with each other; Admitting their faults and apologizing. Henrik didn't think he was *perfect* anymore, and now, Tino had nothing to hide. He had shown him everything, from his terrible past to his current bad habits. And Henrik loved him just the same, perhaps even more so than before. And even though they had fought and Tino had cried, he wouldn't have asked for it to be changed. He couldn't hope for any other outcome.

Because Henrik was his boyfriend, and everything was okay.

"Um—can you close your eyes?" Henrik asked from the seat next to him.

Tino laughed and did so. "Sure thing." He would play along. He liked it when Henrik would be all cute and shy like that, especially because he seemed so dedicated to surprising him. He sat back in his seat and covered his face with his hands—and as much as he wanted to—he didn't peek through his fingers.

The car drove on for a short while before eventually coming to a stop and parking.

"Um—You can open them now," Henrik muttered.

He put his hands down and felt something being pressed into them. He glanced at it.

"Your ticket," Henrik said.

Tino brought the slip of paper up to his eyes. "A ticket? For what? What's this?" he asked.

“To get inside...for the show,” Henrik said with a sheepish little smile.

Tino glanced out the window. He wasn't sure *what* he had expected, but it certainly wasn't this. Crowds of people gathered in a parking lot, with a massive stadium out front. They were decked out in spikes, with large boots and heavy black make-up.

“Metallica,” Henrik mumbled, “...Thought you might want to go to one of their shows, they were in town...”

Tino wasn't even sure how to verbalize his feelings. His heart surged with overwhelming love and affection—for this sweet and gentle man who had gone out of his way to do this for him; This man who was himself a fan of ABBA and bubblegum pop, had bought tickets for a metal concert—just for the two of them. He just couldn't help it. He loved this man, more than anything he had ever loved before. He launched himself up and onto the car console, throwing his arms around Henrik's neck and assaulting his cheek with kisses.

“Thank you—thank you so much, kulta!” Tino shouted.

Henrik let out a low breath of a laugh, and a small satisfied little smile formed on his lips. “Glad you're excited.”

Tino threw his father's jacket off his shoulders and replaced it with his leather one again. He was about to jump out of the car before he stopped. “Wait!” he exclaimed, diving over in his seat and rummaging through the back of the car.

“Hm?” Henrik hummed.

“Sorry—I just need to find something,” Tino said, glancing back at him. “Give me a minute.” He dug around for a few seconds, until he was eventually able to find what he had been looking for. A black eyeliner pen. Though it was a little old, it would do quite nicely. “Here it is!” Tino exclaimed.

“...What's that?” Henrik asked.

“Eyeliner!” Tino said. “I'm gonna put some on, do you want me to do yours too?”

“Um—” he mumbled, shifting in his seat. “Never worn that before.”

“What? Makeup?”

He nodded—cheeks tinged with pink .

Perhaps he thought that he wasn't the type for make-up. He was, after all, a big, tall, intimidating Swedish man with a tendency to glare. He was incredibly masculine—with big strong arms and scars all over his body. But that wasn't all there was to him, because as much as he loved wood carving and carpentry—he was also a fan of sewing and embroidery. Tino loved that about him. He wasn't afraid to be himself—not at all. He looked like he was tough as nails—when in reality he was sweeter than sugar.

“Why don't I do mine first,” Tino suggested, opening the cap, “then we can see if you like it. Does that sound good?”

“Mm,” he responded, nodding again.

“Good,” Tino said happily. He popped open the pen and sat up on the console, using the rearview mirror to guide his hand. Each flick of the pen was precise—as he had done this many times. There were some hobbies of his that required talent and something like that only came with practice. He carved massive, spiky wings around his eyes, the black sharply contrasting against his pale white face. When he was finished he got closer to the mirror and admired his work.

“What do you think?” Tino asked, “Too much?” He glanced down at Henrik.

He had that silly little awed expression on his face, where his eyebrows would go up slightly and his mouth would open just so. He was adorable.

“...Wow,” he managed to say.

Tino chuckled, feeling more confident than he had in years. Everything felt right, like every day he’d lived since now had been leading up to this moment. He had nothing to hide anymore, he had shown every dark and ugly side of himself and was still loved. He felt free. Tino ran his hand through Henrik’s golden blond hair before letting it fall to cup his cheek.

“You like it?”

He blushed a little. “Mm.”

“Would you like some of your own?”

“...You think it would suit me?”

“I know it would,” Tino replied with a sappy smile.

“...You can...you can do it then,” he said, flushing in embarrassment.

Tino grinned a toothy little smile before leaning in on him over the console. “Okay, close your eyes and don’t open them until I say.”

He grunted in agreement.

Tino leaned in close and removed his glasses, folding them neatly and placing them on the car’s dashboard as he got to work. For Henrik, he decided that downward facing spikes would suit him quite nicely—not just because of the shape of his eyes—but also the fact that it would take him a while, meaning that he could hold his *boyfriend’s* face in his hands for as long as he wanted to.



When Henrik's eyes were closed, he looked serene and peaceful. To other people—it might've been a surprise that he looked this vulnerable—but not to Tino. This was a wonderful reflection of his true inner self—one that he was always able to see, even when his eyes were open. Even if it was something that would be fleeting...he was glad he got to share this moment with him. When he was finished with his work he closed the pen and kissed his forehead—signaling the completion of his work.

“All done,” he hummed, placing Henrik's glasses back on his face.

His eyes fluttered open, and he sat up a little to look in the reflection of the rearview mirror.

“Do you like it?” Tino asked.

But he didn't need a verbal answer, because it was written all over his face. From the small smile that tugged at his lips to the way his eyes crinkled—he clearly liked it a lot. It made Tino feel warm that he was able to do that for him—to make him happy with such a simple action.

The words repeated over and over in their heads—but there was no need to say them out loud.

I love you.

I love you. I love you. I love you.

And though Tino would've hesitated from the amount of smoke that was probably still lingering on his lips, Henrik brought his hand around his back and pulled him down, kissing him with such passionate intensity that he melted into his arms.

Part of what made Henrik's kisses so wonderful was how steady he was. Most of the kisses he had received in the past...they were done out of obligation—not out of love; They were quick, sloppy and absolutely disgusting. But with Henrik it was just the opposite. He was slow, and any movements he did make were used to bring Tino closer to him. He caressed him with gentle, calloused hands and would crane his neck forward to deepen their kisses. Even though Henrik was usually so quiet—he was actually quite talkative, if you could only read his body language. And he loved that about him most. There was no need for words, sometimes a look is all that is needed.

When they broke apart, Henrik gave a little happy hum, he didn't seem to mind that taste of smoke at all, which made Tino feel relieved. He wanted to ignore that stench until it was off of him, and he appreciated Henrik pretending it wasn't there.

“...Ready for the concert?” he asked.

“Absolutely!” Tino replied. He moved up and off the console and went over to the passenger side door. He was excited about the concert, yes—but even more so about spending time with his new *boyfriend*.

Henrik stepped out from around the car and joined Tino at the passenger side.

Looking at him fully—he looked kind of strange, with his heavy black eyeliner and his light pink flannel. Tino laughed.

“What's so funny?” he asked, taking Tino's hands.

“Hm, oh nothing—you just look kind of silly,” he said with a teasing smile.

Henrik looked down at himself and frowned. Tino decided to elaborate. “You know—how you're wearing something so bright to a metal concert.”

“Oh,” Henrik said. He looked back up to Tino before taking his eyes on his shirt again. “...Think I can fix that...”

“Really?” Tino laughed.

And to his surprise, Henrik began unbuttoning his shirt. His blush was heavy—but not from embarrassment—it was more like he was nervous. He knew that he wasn't insecure about his body at all, quite the opposite actually. He just seemed apprehensive to show it to Tino, because that was intimate wasn't it? And Tino knew better than anyone how shy he was about that. It really was sweet how he always asked for permission—in the beginning with kisses especially. He loved how much he valued his comfort.

Now though, Tino was happy to see how much more comfortable Henrik was getting with him.

Shyly, he unbuttoned the last button—the one at the top and pulled his shirt off. And he was just as beautiful as he remembered. From all that time ago—when he had first seen him in that gym, with that herculean body that may very well have been sculpted by God himself. Tino swallowed and scratched the back of his neck, trying—and failing to relieve the heat that was building in his face and

the butterflies in his stomach. Of course he'd seen Henrik shirtless before—but he'd never been allowed to look at him for this long. Before—any glimpses of him had been brief and fleeting—but now...he was putting himself up on display, just for Tino to enjoy.

Henrik seemed to take note of how red his face had gotten, because he laughed a quiet little chuckle as he pulled him close, allowing him to rest his head against his bare chest.

“Better?” he asked.

“Much,” Tino squeaked. He used his hands to gently caress Henrik's body—something he had done many times through his shirt but was now doing so on skin. His muscles were firm, and he found himself tracing over several scars that he hadn't noticed before. If they had been in a less public setting, he probably would've brought his head down and kissed every single one. But that would be for another time. Henrik loosened and took Tino by the hand. Together, the two of them began to walk up to the building.

“Never been to a concert like this before,” he said. “You'll have to help me.”

“That's okay,” Tino laughed, “I'm sure you'll do great.”

He hummed—like it was something that he disagreed with slightly, but shrugged his shoulders. “If you say so.”

The location looked pretty modern—with stone walls and a doming top. He didn't recognize it—but then again he didn't really go out too often. He usually didn't have the money for that kind of thing, a concert would've remained completely out of his reach had it not been for Henrik. There weren't many trees around, and the parking lot was filled with many vehicles—including a lot of motorcycles. The concert must've started a while ago—though he doubted it mattered. He would enjoy this—no matter how much time he spent there.

Before he knew it, he began to run. Everything in his body telling him to get into that building—to make it into that mosh pit and to have the time of his life. Just like he used to—with his father. Those were good memories, and tonight would be too. He heard a quiet laugh behind him, definitely coming from Henrik as he was dragged along with him.

When they were getting their tickets scanned, Tino was bouncing on the balls of his feet with excitement, hardly able to remain still as a red wristband was placed around his wrist. When the two of them were through security, he began running again, sprinting down dark rooms until he finally made it to a large set of white double doors. He could hear the music blasting from behind them, and his breath hitched with anticipation.

“Ready?” Henrik asked.

“Ready,” Tino said.

They pushed open the doors.

Everything seemed to stop for a moment.

It was all so beautiful. There must have been hundreds of people there, all pushing against each other and moshing to the beat of the music. Though the overhead lights were dark the stage was incredibly well lit, with hundreds of bright red lasers shooting throughout the stadium. There was a massive TV

that hung from the ceiling, which displayed all the action on the stage in stunning detail. It was all so wonderful. The heavy metal music was blasting into his ears, but he didn't care. In fact, he loved it.

"Come on! Come on!" Tino shouted to Henrik, though he doubted he could hear him. "Let's get down there right now!" He dragged him by the hand. Henrik followed behind him, allowing him to take him down into the depths of the crowd. Tino was able to make his way through it easily—it was almost second nature. He'd done this many times before and would probably do it many times in the future as well. Hopefully, with Henrik by his side. And even though he had been to what felt like hundreds of these kinds of events before, the adrenaline still pumped through his veins like it did the first time. He felt his breath catch as the loud music sounded off around him. Tino felt giddy, joyful even, as his eyes took in every inch of his surroundings. He screamed out throwing both arms up in a moment of pure invigoration. His hands both displayed the sign of the devil.

They stayed there for what could've been minutes, hours, or days—dancing along and enjoying the incredible atmosphere; because here, nothing mattered. Absolutely nothing but the sound of the music and each other's presence. The roar of the crowd and the blinding lights. The fire that flew up from the stage and the incredible sense of love that Tino felt.

"Isn't this fun, kulta?" Tino yelled over the music.

Henrik tilted his head a bit as though he couldn't quite tell what Tino was saying. But as it turned out, he didn't need to know—as he understood perfectly. He awkwardly punched his fist into the air to show his enthusiasm—throwing his hand into that same sign.

Tino laughed as he looked at him. He seemed like he was having a lot of fun, with twinkling sea-green eyes and a small smile on his lips. This...this night was amazing. It was beautiful and stunning, and he needed it—to cherish it for the rest of his days. He pulled out his cellphone and hoisted it into the air.

"Smile!" he yelled, grabbing Henrik by the shoulders and pulling him down. He could barely react, capturing the both of them in the moment as they smiled together. And damn it, he loved him too much. He leaned forward and kissed him, snapping little pictures as their lips mashed together.

He needed the world to know it, he loved him so much.

"You're the best boyfriend ever!" Tino shouted as they tore themselves apart.

"Boyfriend..." Henrik repeated, like he almost couldn't believe it was real.

"Boyfriend!"

"Boyfriend." Henrik said, this time more firmly as he held Tino at his waist. He lifted him up letting Tino rest his hands on his shoulders as he spun him before bringing him back to the ground. "You're my boyfriend."

"And you're mine!" Tino said.

Henrik held him tighter to him, assaulting his face with kisses from the top of his forehead to down to his chin. He didn't even seem to care that some people were beginning to stare at them, all he wanted was to declare his love. And that made Tino's heart fill with an intense amount of warmth.

"I love you."

"Love you too."

When the two of them eventually stumbled out of the concert hall and back to the parking lot, they looked like absolute wrecks. Their eyeliner was smeared and messy and their bodies were coated with sweat. When they got to the car, they did nothing but sit in silence, panting heavily as they caught their breath from such an outrageous night. Tino's voice was scratchy and raw from screaming, and he downed the rest of the bottled water he'd bought. He threw the empty plastic container behind his head and into the back of his car.

"...That was amazin'," Henrik said, still catching his breath.

Tino looked over to him, leaning back in his seat with a content little sigh. His eyes trailed down over Henrik's shirtless figure, lingering there for a moment before looking back to his face.

"It was."

It was quiet again for a moment as they continued to catch their breath.

"Thank you for taking me," Tino said.

"Mm," Henrik replied.

Tino squirmed in his seat. "You know, kulta, I have a surprise for you too. You'll have to wait until we get back home though."

Henrik looked at him, not seeming to catch his hint as he gave a small little nod. It would make sense to him in time though, they'd only have to wait until they were at his house.

Henrik pulled the car into reverse and Tino plugged the aux cord into his phone, but he didn't play his usual music—this time opting for one of Henrik's favorite bands. ABBA. He looked a bit surprised when those familiar chords rang out over the speakers and a pleasant smile filled his face. Tino was a bit shocked at himself when he was able to recall most of the lyrics to the songs. He croaked out the words in his scratchy voice under his breath, but it wasn't quiet enough to evade Henrik's notice.

"You listen to ABBA? Hardly seem the type," he asked with a small chuckle.

"No!" Tino said, his cheeks flushing hot. "They just...remind me of you."

Henrik took one hand off the wheel and held Tino's. He huffed a bit of air, in an almost triumphant little puff. Clearly, he was proud of himself. "Glad you like it."

"If you're so glad you should sing with me."

"Mm, that's okay," he hummed. "Like your voice better than mine."

"Even right now?" Tino teased, singing louder to show off how strained from shouting his voice had become.

Henrik nodded. "'Course," he replied.

Tino puffed out his cheek but shrugged, and they spent the rest of the car ride together, blasting ABBA until they finally returned home.

Unbeknownst to Henrik, Tino had been counting the seconds.

When the two of them stepped out of the car, it didn't escape Tino's notice that Tolys' car was no longer parked outside the house. Still though he had to be careful. He grabbed Henrik by the hand and pushed him into the front door, surveying around to see if anyone was home.

But all the lights were off.

It was dead silent.

No one was home.

A shiver ran up Tino's spine.

"So...uh," Henrik mumbled a little, "where's the surprise?"

"Our room," Tino said, dragging him along as he crept around the house and up the staircase.

"*Our?*" Henrik repeated.

"Yes."

They stood outside the door to their room.

"Close your eyes."

Henrik did so, putting his head down.

Tino opened the door and ushered him inside.

Of course he hadn't actually gotten him anything; his surprise would be far sweeter than any object could be. Slowly, he guided Henrik's hands to his clothes, beginning to remove them. His leather jacket hit the floor in a heap, the metal spikes clicking together before settling on the ground. Tino kissed him as he guided Henrik's fingers around the hem of his shirt, and began to pull before stopping when he faced some resistance. Despite Henrik's eyes being closed, face had turned a bright red—brighter than anything Tino had ever seen. His blush was so intense that his face was almost entirely scarlet. Tino honestly had no idea that he could react that *strongly* to something.

"Oh," he said, not stammering only because of the shortness of the phrase.



Tino laughed. No longer would their only experience together be one of drunk impulsiveness, now, they could love each other for who they were. With all of their flaws on display—all of their hurt and

pain—but also all of their love. All of that overwhelming love that they felt towards one another would come to fruition, in a night that the both of them would never forget.

“What?” He asked playfully, “open your eyes already!”

Henrik swallowed and held his hands around his stomach—likely wanting to fiddle with the end of his shirt that he was no longer wearing. “Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

Henrik turned his head, and Tino’s face grew hotter as he felt those beautiful sea-green eyes on him. And though he knew he was nervous, he could feel the affection soaking in from his gaze.

How much he loved him.

How much he wanted him.

“Uh—Tino,” he stuttered, “do you want to—um.” He was completely short circuiting, something that Tino thought was very adorable.

“To have sex?”

“Mm,” he choked out.

Tino let his fingers ghost along the sides of Henrik’s body before finding rest at his hips. “Depends on if you want to.”

“I do.” He responded immediately. But though his answer was quick, he still seemed to be very anxious—for a reason Tino couldn’t quite place.

“Are you alright?” he asked.

“Mm,” he looked to the side for a moment. “Just—uh...”

“Yes?”

“Never done this sober before...”

“Oh!” Tino said in surprise, “Really?”

He didn’t mind. As long as he would love him now, that was all that mattered. The past be damned; It was nothing.

“...That okay?” he asked sheepishly.

“Of course,” Tino reassured him with a small peck. “We can go slow if you’d like.”

He nodded, and put his hands on Tino’s shoulders.

“Good,” he said encouragingly. He leaned forward, and pulled him into a long and passionate kiss.

And for that entire night, they were nothing but each other's.

Chapter 16

Chapter Notes



When Tino woke up that morning, he had been greeted with the warm feeling of Henrik's arms wrapped tightly around him. His head lay on Henrik's chest, listening to the soft heartbeat of the man below him. He remembered back to the last time he was in that position, straining to hear his pulse as that fire raged behind them. Tino blinked his eyes awake and rubbed them, distancing himself from the memory. He wasn't there now. He was home, in bed, with the man he loved. That's all that mattered now.



He sat up and looked outside his window, and judging from the darkness outside it was about 4 am. Tino rubbed his eyes again, briefly wondering if it was worth it to go back to sleep when Henrik's arm

sleepily wrapped around his waist.

“Come back,” his boyfriend said, blinking at him through squinting, tired, and mostly blind eyes.

This wasn’t like all those other nights—waking up alone in a stranger’s bed with a terrible hangover and heavy remorse. Unlike all those before him, Henrik cared about him, and something like that made all the difference. They didn’t have sex to be used—to be taken from and tossed aside—they had sex because it meant something. Finally, he was released from his past. No longer would he be who he was back in Finland—that crazy party animal well known for being easy. To Henrik—and everyone else here in America, he was simply Tino Väinämöinen.

“Okay,” Tino replied, moving closer to him, “Let me in.”

Henrik moved his arm up, allowing Tino back into their warm embrace. They settled back down, and Tino closed his eyes again. Henrik kissed his cheek. And his nose. And anywhere else he could reach without having to move too much from their position. When they were in bed like this, it was like nothing else in the world mattered. Everything but their basic selves melted away, until all they had to share was the warmth and closeness their togetherness brought. What they had together was new to him, but it was also fascinating.

Henrik had drifted off to sleep again as Tino kissed him for what was supposed to be the final time. In years past, now would’ve been his cue to get all his clothes on, sneak out of the house, and rush home before anyone noticed he was gone. Now, it was because he wanted his lover to actually get some sleep.

But Henrik woke up again anyway. He sat up slightly, making the both of them readjust as he picked up his glasses and put them on.

“Go back to bed,” Tino said, feigning disapproval.

“Can’t, I’m a light sleeper.” he said with a small teasing smile.

Tino rolled his eyes but smiled, pushing his boyfriend back down onto the bed so he was in the position he was in before.

“Besides,” Henrik added, “I don’t want to”

“Why not?” Tino replied, leaning over him slightly.

Henrik looked up at him. His smile widened slightly, and his face flushed in shyness. “Cause you’re here.”

“Awww!” Tino laughed. They kissed again, in a wholesome, sappy sort of way reserved only for first lovers. Because that’s what they were, weren’t they? Tino hadn’t loved someone like this before. Henrik hadn’t either. So this was new for both of them. They’d had a few stumbles sure, but anything that went wrong—they’d figure it out together.

Their hands traced each other, searching for the curvature of the human form. They felt for the nuances of each other's bodies, where skin rose where it shouldn’t, where there were bruises and imperfections, and where the veneer of perfection had worn off so they could only see what was really there. Tino found himself getting lost in Henrik’s eyes. Even through his tiredness, they were as bright as the baltic sea, glittering and shining as they looked over at him. They communicated everything he’d ever need to know, and Henrik would never even have to speak a word. Though, he liked his

voice too. It was low, deep, and as rich as dark chocolate—not to mention his cute little accent. Tino's gaze trailed lower, landing him to look at several small scars on his torso. He had to admit that it was hard to imagine him and Mathias actually *fighting* to the point of leaving scars—though he doubted that it was anything serious. He leaned forward, bringing his hands down to trace them—an action which made Henrik sit up a bit in surprise, but he didn't object to it.

“What happened here?” Tino asked, lightly tracing a small scar on his waist.

“Hm,” Henrik hummed, thinking for a moment, “Think Mathias pushed me into a desk. Not sure though.”

“Are all your scars from Mathias?”

“Most of them. Except for this one.” He pointed to the one on his forehead and Tino promptly kissed it. “That one's my favorite.”

Tino's face flushed a little. “Right,” he replied, somewhat awkwardly. He changed the subject. “Does that mean you have a least favorite?”

“Mm,” Henrik leaned back, putting his hand over his torso and covering it. “...But it's embarrassin'.”

“You don't have to show me if you don't want to,” Tino said.

“I'd like to,” he mumbled. He turned to the side, facing away from him to stand up, but he stopped in hesitation.

He must've stopped because of the naked state of his body—something which Tino understood. His boyfriend was a bit shy about this kind of thing, but that was okay. As long as he knew he wasn't trying to pressure him into anything.

“Really, you don't have to show me anything if you're uncomfortable with it.”

“I want to though,” Henrik said, glancing briefly over his shoulder. He put his hand over the sheets, as if he was going to stand, but stopped again.

“Would it be better if I did it with you?”

“...Mm.”

“Okay, Kulta.” Tino shifted and stood up, carelessly tossing the blankets away and walking around the side of the bed until he was in front of Henrik. “Is that better?” he asked gently, interlocking their palms. Tino had no qualms with being naked, he *was* from Finland after all. Nakedness wasn't seen as inherently sexual or inappropriate. Briefly, he wondered if Henrik cared so much because he was basically raised in America, where nakedness is seen as much more private and intimate. He pushed the thought aside.

“...Tino,” Henrik breathed.

“Yes?”

He felt his eyes glaze over his naked body—surely not missing anything as he looked up and met his eyes. “...You're beautiful.”

“Thank you,” Tino said, feeling a rosy blush warm his face. He rubbed his thumbs over their interlocked hands. “I love you.”

“Love you too,” Henrik said before glancing down at the sheet that covered his lap. “Um, can you close your eyes?”

Tino nodded, looking down to the floor and squeezing his eyes shut. He felt the blanket hit the floor at his feet.

Henrik took a deep breath. “...You can open them.”

If Tino had thought Henrik was stunning before—he thought he was even more stunning now. Words could do little to describe how he felt looking at him. But with his limited English, he would try his best. He almost couldn’t stop himself from staring, drinking in the sight of him. He was so well toned—so strong, and just *wonderful*. The waning moonlight coming in from the window bathed him in a soft blue light that complimented his sea-green eyes. Despite his disheveled hair and tired expression, he was still beautiful. In all honesty, Tino thought the shaggy hair looked good on him. Maybe he should try to mess it up sometime. The white scars that littered his body seemed more pronounced now, perhaps because Tino had never gotten the chance to look at them in detail before. This was the first time he’d allowed himself to be fully seen. Tino pulled him close and hugged him, letting his hands trace his skin; he was touching him just to feel him, to show his fondness and affection.

“Wow,” Tino said.

His boyfriend was a light red in the face, but he did the same as Tino did, feeling his skin and showing his love through his fingertips. It was a unique feeling, to be loved in this way. It was soft and gentle, and completely devoid of sexual intent. He’d never had anyone hold him like this before, to touch his body just to *feel* him. No one had ever showed him this much care before.

They began to rock together, softly swaying from side to side as they held each other close.

“No one’s ever touched me like this before,” Tino said.

“Me neither.”

“...I’m glad you’re my first then.”

“Mm...Me too.” Henrik kissed the top of his head.

“Now, you were showing me that scar?” Tino asked, loosening his arms around him.

Henrik’s face flushed lightly. “Er—right.” He took a small step back and turned around showing Tino his back. “...Right here,” he mumbled, pointing to a laceration slightly above his hip bone. “...That one.”

It was light pink—and probably at the very least a few years older than most of the other ones. The skin was a bit raised, and there was a noticeable indent on it.

“What happened?” Tino asked, tracing it with his finger.

“...Couple days after we met, Mathias threw a rock at me. First scar I got from him. It bled a lot—stained my shirt...Other kids got more scared of me than before...if you can believe that.” He scoffed.

“I’m sorry that happened...” Tino said with a frown, as Henrik turned back around.

He gave a tiny shrug. “It’s okay. All in the past now.”

“...If you say so,” Tino said with a sigh.

“Mm,” Henrik hummed in insistence.

He stared at him for a moment. “...Can I kiss it?”

“Oh, um, if you want,” he mumbled.

Tino nodded and walked around him, bending down and pushing his lips onto the laceration. He stood back up and placed his arms on Henrik’s shoulders.

They started to rock softly again.

“There,” he hummed, “all better.”

Henrik let out a little huff of a laugh. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome!”

The two of them stood in silence for a while, quietly taking in the atmosphere in the early morning with synced breaths and gentle closeness. He never wanted to do this with anyone else.

Henrik yawned and Tino squeezed him tighter.

“Tired?”

“Mm.”

Tino leaned forward and kissed his cheek and the two of them separated before pushing themselves back under the covers. Henrik wrapped his arm around Tino and rested his head against his chest, his other hand going to trace the skin at his torso.

“Goodnight, kulta,” he said, running his hand through his hair.

Henrik mumbled something that he couldn’t quite hear.

“Sorry, what was that?”

“Oh—um...” His face flushed lightly in shyness. “...Natti natti...Hjärtanskär...” For once, the words rolled effortlessly off his tongue, no longer constrained by a thick accent as he spoke the soft words. Tino blushed a little. He’d always loved the sound of the Swedish language. Of course, even in his years of trying to learn it—as was compulsory through the Finnish education system—he’d never been much good. But here was Henrik, speaking it so effortlessly. It only made sense—it was his native language after all. Still, it made his heart sing.

“And what does that mean?”

“Um—” His face grew darker and he turned it away—probably not wanting to look at him out of embarrassment. “...Night-y night...” He sat up and moved away a little further. “...sweetheart.”

That was the first time he’d ever called him something like that... That was the first time *anyone* had called him something like that... His heart leapt with warmth and he launched forward violently, throwing the two of them into an embrace that was so tight he was sure they lost their air.

“You’re so cute!” Tino exclaimed.

“...You like it?”

“Yes!”

Henrik let out a happy little sigh, and the two of them laid back down, now holding each other much closer as he settled back onto Tino’s chest.

“...Love you.”

Tino brushed his hands through his soft hair. “I love you too!”

Henrik squeezed Tino, letting a hand fall down by his waist as he held him. They laid there for a long time, quiet silence overtaking them until their breaths grew deeper, bringing them back to sleep.

Dinner tonight was—as always—prepared by Tolys. He had called it ‘bilviniai blynai with varškės apekepas’, and though Henrik was no expert in Lithuanian, he *did* know that they tasted like fried potatoes and cheese curds. He always made the best food—and he was always so humble about it too.

As was seemingly customary, Raivis claimed the spot next to him and Tino sat across from him—next to Eduard, leaving Tolys to sit at the head of the table, smiling politely as he watched them enjoy the food that he had spent so long preparing.

Henrik himself had offered to help cook, or to prepare dinner every once and a while, but Tolys always said that he didn’t need that kind of help. It seemed that cooking was one of his favorite things to do. It felt a bit strange—when he had been living with Mathias, he’d always be the one to cook dinner for them. His best friend had always been quick to eat his meals—always commenting that it was ‘more delicious than yesterday’s.’

...It felt...almost foreign that they didn’t live together anymore...

Still though—it wasn’t like he was alone at all.

There was Eduard, who mostly liked to keep to himself—though he occasionally came downstairs to the living room to make a quip or two. Most of the time he was in his room on his computer—working on something or another, and if he wasn’t doing that, he was playing computer games. Though as much as he enjoyed them, it seemed that he would never let something like that distract him if he had actual tasks to complete. He was really hardworking, so much so that it didn’t seem that he liked to do much else—well, other than talk to Tino that is. They seemed like really good friends—Tino would sometimes leave their room late at night to go into his, where they’d laugh and chat together until the early hours of the morning when he would sneak back into bed like nothing happened at all. Of course Henrik knew about this though, he was a very light sleeper and always woke up when he left. When he’d seen Eduard’s room, it was covered from wall to wall with ice dance medals and trophies. He had once said that he liked to put glitter in his hair because of the competitions he used to do. Allegedly, he used to do it so often that it became routine, though Henrik thought it was probably because he enjoyed that it shone and sparkled when he flipped it.

Next was Raivis, who was—even after all this time—still very strange. If Eduard liked to keep to himself, Raivis was like that to an extreme. He almost never left his room unless it was time for dinner or if it was late at night. He liked to sneak downstairs when everyone else was asleep—watching strange TV shows in a language neither of them understood. Though he was almost always

carrying a bottle of alcohol he never appeared to get drunk. It was almost like it didn't affect him at all—which was sort of unnerving. Most of the time though, if Henrik saw him, he was writing in a little notebook. He didn't seem to like when anyone leaned over his shoulder while he was writing in it—always swiftly shutting it closed and waiting for the person to leave him. He had to wonder if everything was alright with him, because it seemed that the dark circles under his eyes were getting worse lately.

Then came Tolys, who was...just so nice. He was always very polite, in a way that sometimes made him come off as a bit shy. If he wasn't so young, Henrik was sure that he'd already be a parent with a small child. He was so caring and compassionate, always being supportive and happy to lend a hand if anyone ever needed anything—even if it was out of his depth. He'd make a good dad one day, Henrik decided. Though, he had to note that he always seemed a bit lonely, and he didn't drink any alcohol when the others did. Perhaps that was a conscious choice? He liked to sit in the living room, curled up on the couch with a book in his hands, but whenever someone would come down, he'd try to engage them in conversation. He'd always let it close completely, not even bothering to bookmark the page. Henrik would've tried to help him if he didn't feel so awkward all the time. He was basically living in their home, but it seemed that they didn't really care too much.

He was grateful for that.

And finally, of course there was his beloved boyfriend Tino. Was there anything that he even needed to say? He was wonderful, *and* he was his boyfriend. He was happy that he would be his first *real* love. He was just as stunningly beautiful as he had been the first time he saw him, with that straw blond hair and those stunning lilac eyes. He could probably listen to him talk for hours, until the light from outside faded and was replaced by nothing but the beams of the moon. Sometimes, when it got dark outside, they'd hold each other close in their bed while Tino would read aloud from the book he was currently reading. As of late, it had been *Hamlet*, which he seemed to like quite a lot. He would always sleep heavily and would find it hard to wake up in the mornings; Though, if it was early enough (usually between 2 and 4 am), Henrik was sometimes woken by the feeling of receiving small kisses to his face. Obviously, he often pretended he was still asleep. It was...an incredible feeling to be loved that much. It was such a small and simple action, but it made him feel like he was probably the luckiest man in the world. It was beyond any shadow of a doubt. Tino loved him. And that made him feel what was probably the greatest joy he'd ever felt. Because they weren't just words. Through every action that they did together, it was overwhelmingly obvious how much he cared about him. It was written all over his face. Tino didn't tell him he loved him, or call him 'kulta', or hold him close out of some obligation, he did those things because he wanted to be with him. And that made his heart soar.

Back before he had met him, he had thought that he'd be alone forever. It's not that he thought he was *broken*, that feeling wouldn't have come until later. People were already afraid of him. How was he to humanize himself to them if he had never even experienced love before? It was such a basic thing, something so simple and spontaneous, something that *everyone* experienced growing up...Well, everyone except for him. It didn't help when Mathias had called him 'unlovable' back in middle school, and it grew worse when he actually started dating Lukas in high school. Because love came easy to Mathias. It poured out of every aspect of his being—from those large and happy smiles that he wished he could replicate, to the way he was so easily able to make friends...Was it really that much of a surprise that he was jealous of him? Mathias had been the first person to give him a chance—and the first to unflinchingly meet his eyes when he first moved here. It was thanks to Mathias that he had any friends at all—hell it was thanks to him that he had Tino now. He could only wonder where he would be without him...

When Henrik had called him that afternoon and said that he and Tino were official, Mathias was so excited that he could hardly keep his voice at a consistent volume—screaming and yelling into the receiver that he was so happy for them. He was making such an exorbitant amount of noise that Lukas and Emil came down to see what all the wailing was about. They both congratulated him when Mathias enthusiastically told them, with Lukas saying that it ‘took him long enough’, and Emil saying that he ‘was happy for him’. But even for Mathias...he was *incredibly* excited about the whole thing. That was another thing he would be left to wonder about.

“Wow, you really went all out, huh, Tolys?” Eduard asked with a grin, “This stuff is amazing!”

“Yeah! Tolys, I love it!” Tino said happily.

“...It’s good,” Raivis said, though he was only eating a small plate, it seemed that he was eating a bigger portion than normal.

“Mm,” Henrik grunted in agreement.

“Oh, thank you,” Tolys responded with a polite little smile. “It took me a while to make, so I really hoped you’d enjoy it.”

“So,” Tino hummed, leaning in on the table and resting his hands on the edge. “How was everyone’s day?”

“Really great!” Eduard said with a smile, his sparkling hair flashing as he flipped it. “I got to spend all day working, and I finished earlier than expected. The extra freetime was really nice.”

Tolys laughed in a teasing manner. “Always working hm? You’ll never change.”

“Nope!” Eduard replied. “Besides, I like it this way. It’s nice to be organized and prepared.”

“Hm,” Raivis puffed in obvious disagreement.

Eduard batted his hand in dismissal of it. “Oh, don’t start. You’re ridiculous.”

“...My day was nice,” Raivis said, returning back to Tino’s original question as he slumped forward in his seat. “I got to sit outside and watch the ravens.”

“Oh,” Tolys said, his voice faltering. “...But didn’t it rain today?”

“Yes,” Raivis said.

“So...you sat outside in the rain and watched the birds?” Tolys asked again to clarify.

“Yes.”

“The birds that weren’t around because it was raining?”

“Yes,” he said again, leaning back in his chair and crossing his arms.

He was...very strange.

“Well, like I said,” Tolys said with a sigh that sounded slightly exasperated, “I spent a lot of the day cooking, which was nice.”

The three of them were very different, and part of him wondered how they'd even become friends in the first place. They all had seemingly completely different interests. Was there some kind of common link that made them get along?

"Um..." Henrik began in his usual, awkward entrances. "How do you know each other?"

"We've been friends since our freshman year," Tolys said, brushing his hair out of his face. "—Of college, of course."

"Mhmm!" Eduard hummed in agreement. "The three of us got put in a triple dorm together and we liked it so much we decided to move in with each other in our junior year; Plus one additional person."

"I got put in a single when I came here," Tino said. "It got really lonely all by myself, so I eventually asked to move in with them."

"We said yes right away," Tolys chirped.

"How could we not?" Eduard snickered. "I couldn't leave my best friend on campus all by himself!"

Tino smiled a bit bashfully before saying something in Finnish, to which Eduard immediately responded in Estonian. Those two had their own secret language of sorts.

"Speaking of," Tolys hummed, "Our rent's due soon—so can I get everyone's portion?"

"Oh—good idea!" Eduard said, shifting in his seat and pulling out his wallet. Raivis, Tolys, and Tino did the same. They each pulled out some wads of cash, but he was surprised when three out of the four of them looked over at him.

"Where's your portion?" Raivis asked bluntly, looking at him through the corner of his eye.

...His *portion*?

"Oh! No!" Tino exclaimed, launching up from his seat and pushing himself to stand. "He's not moving in or anything!"

"Oh," Tolys said, sounding more than a bit surprised. "Really?"

"Why'd you move all his stuff in then?" Eduard asked, teasingly elbowing Tino in the arm as he snickered.

"Because he needed a place to put it all! We were gonna find him a new roommate!"

"...And how much looking have you done for that?" Raivis asked.

"Uh—" Tino stuttered, "...none."

"Exactly," Raivis said.

"And weren't *you* the one who kept insisting on getting a new roommate in the first place?" Eduard teased again.

Tino nodded sheepishly.

"So..." Tolys began looking over at Henrik, "...Do you want to move in?"

Were they being serious? They really seemed like it. None of them looked to be joking at all, well, other than Eduard, who looked to be teasing Tino as they spoke to each other in their native tongues. Would he like to move in? That idea was...insanity. But then again, he could either take their offer and live with them, be forced to move in with Lukas, Mathias, and Emil, *or* he could try and find a new roommate by himself. Two of those options were...not ideal. He already didn't like staying at Lukas' house, so there was no way that he could handle living there. Not to mention that he would probably move into the guest room. He shivered. The other option was to find a new person that he could room with...but who was he kidding, that hadn't worked in the past and that wouldn't work now. People were still scared of him. And on the other hand...Tino's roommates weren't.

So he supposed that there really was no other option. Because really, how could he have been expected to turn down the offer of getting to share a room with Tino.

"Uh—sure," he said.

"Really?!" Tino exclaimed, filled with so much surprise and disbelief that it made Eduard almost choke on his laughter. "You want to?"

"...Um—if that's okay..." he mumbled.

Tino and Eduard nodded vigorously, while Tolys did so more politely. Raivis tilted his head forward once—that being the only acknowledgement of the new development.

Tolys clapped his hands together and held them over his chest. "It's settled then," he smiled.

"Great," Eduard said, "Now that we have that situation dealt with—can we get our rent payments in?" "Oh—uh, right," Henrik stuttered, reaching into his pocket and pulling out his wallet. He discarded his portion on the table.

Tolys got up and grabbed a large jar from the kitchen, into which he poured all of the money.

"Okay," he hummed, picking up plates. "Any ideas for family movie night?"

"Can we watch the new Marvel movie?" Eduard asked excitedly. "I still haven't seen End Game yet and I'm desperate to watch it!"

"Sure," Tolys replied with a tiny shrug.

Eduard helped Tolys pick up the remaining dishes and Raivis disappeared out of the kitchen and into the living room—leaving Henrik and Tino alone.

"...I'm sorry about them," Tino apologized, taking his hands. "Are you sure you want to do this? You don't have to."

"I do," Henrik answered.

"Really?"

"Yes," he said with a small laugh.

They wrapped their arms around each other and held each other tightly.

"This feels right." Henrik said quietly into Tino's ear.

“I’m glad you think so.” Tino replied. “I’m so happy you’re staying.”

Chapter 17

Chapter Notes



“Kulta, I’m no good at this,” Tino sighed.

“Be patient, Hjärtanskär,” Henrik said with a little laugh.

They were sitting outside of the house, legs dangling off the back porch of their home as they held wood carving knives and blocks of wood in their hands. Tino had insisted that he draw the sketch, which was of a cute little Moomin—though he seemed less enthusiastic about the actual *carving* part of the job. Tino had also—obviously—sketched out Henrik’s own wood piece too, insisting that *he* carve Snufkin. What Tino had drawn for him was very complicated, but with his many years of experience it would be a simple task, so he really didn’t mind.

The back of the house was a simple little place, with a wood deck and a small little porch swing—perfect for two—though Henrik and Tino wouldn’t sit there this evening. The air was cold but neither minded, both sitting quietly in the ambiance of the winter season. In front of them lay nothing but a small grassy backyard, enclosed by a little brown picket fence; beyond that was only the image of the setting sun, tinting the sky a vibrant pink as it set.



But Tino was having a very difficult time, and Henrik felt very glad that he had forced him to wear a set of protective gloves—otherwise he probably would’ve already cut several large dents into his

hands. His way of carving was far too harsh, and he almost always took out more wood than he had intended to. For as innocent and meek as he looked from afar, he actually had quite the fire-y spirit...which was a bit ironic considering that he was a former firefighter.

“Can you say that again?” Tino asked sweetly.

Henrik reached behind him for one of his carving gouges before using it against the mass of wood in his hand. “...Hjärtanskär?”

Tino sighed again, but this time more in a contented, breathy tone. “I’ve always loved Swedish, it’s so cute.”

Henrik looked at him, slightly confused. Personally, he always thought the language sounded kind of dorky. Of course, he didn’t mean that to insult his generations upon generations of Swedish-speaking ancestors, but they probably all sounded very silly, even the vikings.

“We had to learn it in school,” Tino said, “but I was never much good.” He hit the block of wood in his hand with a heavy strike from the carving gouge.

“Oh? Did you?” Henrik said with a little puff of a laugh. “Care to show me?” He was interested to say the *least* in Tino’s Swedish skills. Finnish was such a rough and jagged language, with harsh sounds and rolling rs, while Swedish was much more...bouncy and friendly sounding. It was a bit silly that *he* of all people spoke a language like that—when it doubtlessly would’ve suited someone like Tino better, and vice versa.

“Show you?” Tino said, his eyes widening. “No way! I haven’t practiced in *years*!”

“Hm,” Henrik said, narrowing his eyes as he concentrated on the wood in his hands. “...Like to hear it though...”

Tino puffed out his cheek, and would’ve definitely crossed his arms if not for the amount of aggressive jabbing and cutting he was doing to the object in his hands.

“Please?” Henrik asked.

Tino rolled his eyes and scoffed in a playful manner. “Fine,” he said, “but you can’t make fun of me.”

“Mm,” Henrik agreed.

Tino let the chisel fall to his lap as he paused, obviously trying to remember knowledge that had spent years being buried.

“Hej, jag heter Tino!” he exclaimed in what was probably the worst accent Henrik had ever heard in his life. At least Mathias somewhat knew what he was doing but with Tino it was just an entirely different beast... His pronunciation was so harsh—and if he didn’t know better he would’ve thought he was yelling. He wasn’t suited at all for such a soft language.

Henrik couldn’t help the smile that crept up on his lips, and almost had to turn away to stop himself from laughing. How could he not? It was incredibly endearing, and *very* cute.

“Hej, Tino,” Henrik returned, trying his best to stifle the snickering that was bubbling up in his throat. “Jag heter Henrik. Jag är från Sverige. Var kommer du ifrån?” Tino was silent for a moment, staring at him as he tried to decipher what he meant. He hadn’t thought asking him where he was from would be

such a hard question for him to answer, it was pretty basic after all, and he was already simplifying his speech to make it easier for him. Tino was truly terrible at this.

Tino narrowed his eyes and put his chin down in thought before brightening again. “Finland!”

Henrik shook his head, the smile now fully sitting on his face as he looked fondly at him. “Jag älskar dig.”

If it was possible, Tino narrowed his eyes more and his lips fell into a fine line. He was concentrating so hard that his tongue poked out between his teeth slightly, obviously wracking his brain for some semblance of what that meant. Normally, he was pretty determined, and never one to back down from a challenge—but he seemed to know how out of depth he was. Perhaps he was intimidated by the prospect of talking with a native speaker, because he gave up with a sigh, craning his neck back and grumbling to himself.

“Sorry,” he said, “I don’t know that one.”

Henrik gave him a playful little smirk. “You sure?”

“Yes,” he huffed, feigning annoyance at his teasing.

“Means ‘I love you’.” Henrik smiled.

“Oh, I see,” Tino giggled and leaned over, kissing his lips before pulling away again.

“Minä rakastan sinua,” Tino said in between kisses.

Of course he knew what that meant. How could he not? That was one of the first things he had looked up on that night at the hospital...but there was *no way* he could admit that. To tell Tino that he had been looking up things like that before they were even together. It was *way* too embarrassing. He’d have to pretend he didn’t know. He couldn’t let him find out.

“What’s that mean?” Henrik asked.

But Tino was *far* too good at reading him now, and must’ve been able to tell that he was hiding something. “I think you know,” he said, setting aside the chisel and block of wood and moving closer to him. Henrik swallowed and tightened his grip on his carving gouge.

“Nope,” he said, plunging the tool into the wood block.

“You sure?”

“Mm.”

“Do you just want me to say it?” Tino laughed.

Henrik didn’t hesitate as he immediately took the chance for an escape route. “Mm,” he grunted again.

“Well, I was just saying ‘I love you’ too.” Tino said, looking down with a soft smile as he picked up his tools again.

Henrik hummed happily. He’d probably never get tired of hearing those words from him. He could probably listen to them over and over again for the rest of time. How could he not? That man was just

wonderful...He watched as Tino whittled away at the wood in his hands, affectionately looking over his aggressive scrapping before moving closer to him. With all the hacking at it he had been doing, Tino would be lucky if it resembled Moomin at all. He shifted, so that his boyfriend sat between his legs and took his hand, guiding it along and helping him with his work.

“Like this,” he said, resting his chin on Tino’s shoulder.

“I told you, I’m no good at this kind of thing,” he said, watching him correct some of his mistakes.

“Don’t care,” Henrik said. “I like it.”

“You would,” Tino said, leaning his head to the side and resting it against Henrik’s.

The intimacy of the moment however, was interrupted by the ringing of Tino’s phone. He looked at the screen for a few seconds, narrowing his eyes in confusion as he read the number. Whoever it was, Henrik didn’t recognize it. Tino answered it, putting it on speaker so that they both could listen.

“Hello, am I speaking to Tino Väinämöinen?” Spoke the voice from the phone.

“Um—yes,” he answered.

“This is Kiku Honda from ‘Heart and Paws Animal Shelter. Would you be willing to come in at some point this week to discuss the animal you brought in a couple of weeks ago?”

Tino seemed to be completely shocked, looking like he was hardly processing the words he heard.

“Uh—yes of course,” he stammered, “Wednesday?”

“Hm,” Kiku said over the phone. “We will be open from 9am to 7pm, please come at your earliest convenience. Thank you.”

The phone clicked, and the two of them were overwhelmed with silence.

“...What was that about?” Henrik asked.

Tino looked over at him, his face still full of confusion. “...I’m not sure...He wanted to ask about that dog, but I dropped her off so long ago. I hope she’s okay...”

“I’m sure she will be,” Henrik mumbled.

Tino sighed and leaned into him. “I hope so.”

For almost the entire rest of the evening they sat in silence, watching the sun set as Henrik finished off the two carvings. In the end, Tino’s vicious hacking at the wood had left Moomin looking kind of...janky. Tino had shook his head and apologized, saying that he tried his best and would do better next time. But Henrik loved it, because now not only did they have a matching set of Moomin and Snufkin wood figures, they were figures that they had made together. And even if Tino hated his little carving, Henrik loved it, because it was his and he had created it.

The two of them snuck upstairs, past Raivis in the living room as he watched some strange drama in a foreign language and shut the door to their room. Henrik placed the figures down, sitting on Tino’s desk as he smiled at them.

“Are you sure you like it?” Tino asked with an awkward laugh.

“Mm,” Henrik grunted.

Tino kicked off his jeans and discarded his jacket, placing it on his desk’s chair before going into his closet and pulling out one of his usual winter themed onesies and clicking off the light. This one resembled Santa Claus, with a red suit, all the way down to the black boots at the ankles. Henrik on the other hand, simply threw off his shirt and replaced his pants with a pair of joggers. They laid down on the bed together, both facing the same direction and Tino wrapping his arm around his waist.

“You know kulta, you had me thinking earlier...”

“Bout what?” Henrik asked, settling down and feeling Tino’s body cup his.

“Do you know any Finnish?” he said with a smile in his voice, whispering into his ear.

It would be a lie to say that he didn’t, but he only knew a couple of basic phrases.

“A little,” he confessed.

“Can I hear?”

Henrik shifted in his position, turning over to face Tino in their bed and caressing his face with his calloused hands.

“It’s not much,” he mumbled.

“You know I don’t care,” Tino laughed, moving forward and kissing his forehead.

Henrik felt his face heat, and he turned away slightly as he said the words. “Moi, minun nimeni on Henrik. Olen kotoisin Ruotsista.” He thought he should tell him something simple, something easy. That his name was Henrik and that he was from Sweden. That was understandable...right? He could only hope.

Tino giggled a little and held him closer.

“You speak so softly, try saying it more aggressively!”

“Moi, minun nimeni on Henrik. Olen kotoisin Ruotsista,” he said again, this time with what he thought was more emphasis, but he was proved wrong by Tino’s continued snickering.

“One more time?” he laughed. “Oh! And you need to roll your rs too!”

“Moi, minun nimeni on Henrik! Olen kotoisin Ruotsista!” he exclaimed.

“Ah! Stop, stop!” Tino cackled, “Stop it! You’re going to wake the whole house up!”

If he didn’t, then surely Tino would, with all the howling he was doing.

“Shh!” Henrik hushed him, bringing him close until his boyfriend’s laughter was muffled by the nape of his neck.

“...You know kulta...I don’t think we’re meant to speak each other’s languages,” he joked.

“Mm,” Henrik hummed in agreement.

“Wait,” Tino paused, “did I ever tell you what ‘kulta’ actually means?”

Henrik's face heated, and he shook his head. Of course he already knew what it meant! He hadn't spent god-knows how many hours doing research on Finland for nothing! But, he definitely couldn't tell Tino that. Not in a million years. Who knows how he'd react to Henrik telling him that he'd spent countless nights looking up Finnish terms of endearment, significant cultural icons, vocabulary, and etcetera in an attempt to understand more about the man who had captivated him so much. Maybe it would've been fine (though it still would be embarrassing to admit) if it had been after they'd gotten together, but it was out of the question to admit it now! He couldn't! He could only be thankful for the darkness around them, because that way, Tino wouldn't be able to see his face and know that he was omitting a bit of the truth. He'd gotten too good at reading him recently.

"It means 'gold'!" Tino laughed, ruffling his hands through Henrik's hair. "And—well, I think it's pretty obvious why I call you that."

"Mm," Henrik hummed, closing his eyes as he felt Tino's fingers massaging his head, though he took special notice that once they fell on the scar above his eye, they remained there.

"I just thought—well, you know," he continued to ramble, "your hair just looks like gold to me!" He retracted his hands, and planted a kiss where they had been, which made Henrik smile a little as he pulled Tino closer.

"Your hair is gold too," he mumbled.

"You think so?" Tino asked, running his hand through it. "I always thought it looked more like straw..."

Henrik shrugged slightly, and kissed Tino's cheek.

"Oh, whatever," he laughed again, "that doesn't matter."

They settled back into their original position, with Henrik turning back over and Tino cupping his body with his own.

"God natt, hjärtanskär," Tino said in his terrible Swedish.

"Hyvää yötä, kulta," Henrik returned in his equally terrible Finnish.

While it seemed that, on the surface, their native languages didn't suit them too well, they actually were a great reflection of who they were underneath it all. Because Henrik was already seen as scary enough, he didn't need a harsh language like Finnish to exacerbate that fact...Not to mention that he couldn't pull it off. He was too gentle for it—far too soft to be able to speak it properly. The same was the case for Tino. Though many people might assume that Swedish would be a great language for him—that was definitely not the case. Swedish was far too subdued a language for someone so loud and boisterous. Finnish suited him too well, with all its rough edges and harsh sounds...not to mention how much he liked to hear it spoken from him. Swedish was great for Henrik, and Finnish was great for Tino. Things were fine, just as they were. And they always would be.

It had been a quiet afternoon, and the sun was now setting into the evening.

Tino, Eduard, and Raivis were all sitting together in the living room, with Raivis watching some kind of Korean drama with Latvian subtitles so no one else could tell what was being said. Tino, personally, had no idea how he had found such a thing. Latvian was a relatively obscure language with only about 1.3 million speakers, though he supposed that in the modern day anything was

possible. Every once and a while, Raivis would take out his notebook and scribble in it, going through pages and pages at a time. Doubtlessly, he was working on writing poetry, but Tino knew better than to ask to see it.

“Doing okay, Raivis?” Eduard laughed, watching him flip through pages from the other side of the couch.

“Hmpf,” he grunted in response.

It was very rare for him to be up and out of his room, and something told Tino that if he could move the TV in there he’d probably never leave it.

“Leave him alone, Eduard,” Tino said with a playful roll of his eyes.

“Fine, fine,” Eduard said, batting his hand. “Anyway, what were we talking about?”

Tino shifted in his position, and started to fiddle with his fingers, reminding Eduard of the topic almost immediately.

“Oh! That’s right!” he exclaimed, “So...how does it feel to be hitched?”

“Hitched?” Tino repeated, unsure of what he meant.

“You know! How does it feel to be with the man of your dreams?!”

Tino’s face flushed a deep red in embarrassment. “Oh, well—”

“Was it everything you hoped for?”

Even if Eduard wasn’t too much of a fan of romance for himself, he was always invested in those of other people—especially Tino’s. He was a hopeless romantic...when it came to other people’s relationships at least. Tino knew that Eduard would much rather break all his fingers and be unable to use his computer for months if it avoided him the prospect of love for himself. He’d seen him be approached before—by a few hopefuls as they slid their numbers across the table to him. He’d always get extremely uncomfortable, pulling at his collar and saying that he ‘wasn’t interested in those kinds of things’. So, instead, he became all too invested in the lives of others. Not that Tino minded telling his best friend of course, it was just a bit embarrassing.

“Yeah,” Tino said shortly, a bit of a sigh escaping his lips as his eyes trailed over to the staircase, where he knew Henrik was, sitting in their room and playing that silly little computer game that he loved so much.

“Aw,” Eduard said with a happy smile, “Look at you—getting all soft.”

“I can’t help it!” Tino said, moving his eyes back to Eduard. “...He’s so cute...”

Raivis lowered the volume on the TV, and turned his head to listen.

“How so?” Eduard asked, leaning forward with teasing interest.

“Well, he’s really shy, and he’s very gentle and reserved. He doesn’t like to talk much, but it’s really easy to see what he’s thinking if you just look at his face. When you learn how to read him, it’s almost impossible to misunderstand him. And I love his cute little accent, and his beautiful eyes and his glasses. Oh—and I love how tall he is, and how passionate about his interests he is. Did you know

that he does embroidery?” He didn’t bother to look at his two roommates, closing his eyes as he went on and on about the man he loved. “And his favorite color is yellow, and he likes it when I read to him. Oh! And he loves to stargaze! Have I mentioned that?”

He probably could’ve gone on rambling forever before Eduard interrupted him, laughing and shaking his hands as he signaled for him to stop.

“Okay, okay,” he chuckled, “I get it.”

“...You should keep going,” Raivis said from the other side of the couch, a black pen in his hand as he looked up to Tino with interest.

“Maybe he will if you let us see what you’re writing in that notebook,” Eduard teased.

Raivis only narrowed his eyes and held it closer to him.

“You know, Tino, it’s nice to see you so happy,” Eduard said, turning his attention back to him.

“Huh?”

“Well, you know how it was before. You refused to see anyone at all! And now look at you! Aren’t you happy?”

Tino didn’t even have to consider the statement. “Yes,” he said. “Yes, I am happy.”

“I’m glad.” Eduard smiled. He looked like he was about to say something more, but they were interrupted by the ringing of the doorbell. But who would be coming by at this hour? It was almost 6—when they were usually eating dinner. It was hardly an appropriate time for someone to come visit...And who would be doing that anyway? It’s not like they really knew anyone who would be coming over... He supposed it could be Lukas or Mathias...but that didn’t make sense. He hadn’t given them his address... So who could it be?

“Can someone get that?” Tolys called from the kitchen.

“I got it!” Tino said, standing up and walking to the door. His curiosity was killing him.

He opened the door with a welcoming smile. He didn’t recognize the man at the front step—who was his same height with shoulder length blond hair. His eyes were a dull jade, and he was quite skinny. He looked visibly startled to see Tino at the doorway, taking a few steps back and defensively putting his hands over his chest.

“Oh,” he managed to say, “is this the wrong house?” Just who was he? And who was he looking for?

“Holy shit!” he heard Eduard say. Tino turned his head around to see him leaning back on the couch and looking through the doorway. He scrambled to his feet and rushed over. “Feliks?”

The man in front of them immediately loosened, seeming to recognize Eduard.

“Does Tolys still live here?” he asked.

“Um—yeah,” Eduard said. “I’ll get him for you.” He turned around, going to fetch their friend. From inside the house, there was a large banging of pot and pans before Tolys stumbled out—still wearing his apron as he rushed to the door. Eduard followed him, standing a few steps behind.

“Feliks!” Tolys exclaimed. “What are you doing here?”

The man in question shrunk back sheepishly. “...Can we talk?”

Tolys looked shocked, his mouth falling open in what looked like disbelief. “...Yes of course,” he said. He quickly untied his apron and pushed it into Tino’s arms. “Can you make dinner tonight?” he asked, “This may take a while.” He didn’t leave time for him to answer, pulling his hair out of the ponytail it was in and stepping outside—shutting the door behind him.

There was a tense silence.

“Raivis,” Eduard called from behind him, “You won’t *believe* who just came by.”

“Who?” he asked with a very bored, gravelly voice, only leaning his head against the back of the couch as he stared over at them.

“Feliks.”

Raivis’ expression changed, as he furrowed his eyebrows, standing up and walking over to the two of them at the doorway.

“Feliks?” he repeated.

“In the flesh,” Eduard replied.

“Wait—sorry,” Tino said, holding Tolys’ apron in his hands and readjusting it. “Who’s Feliks?”

Eduard shook his head. “An old friend—he was closer with Tolys...I think they knew each other since they were kids—childhood friends.” Tino was about to interject and say something, but Eduard didn’t allow it. “They had a huge falling out after Tolys started dating Ivan. He just left.”

“He hasn’t talked to us in *years*,” Raivis said with a surprising amount of emphasis.

...If that was true...then why was he back here now? The three of them looked to the closed door, before turning back around. It was really none of Tino’s business, so he shouldn’t concern himself with it. His grip tightened on the apron in his hands. And now...*he* was in charge of making dinner. He really wasn’t much of a chef, so maybe a certain special someone could help him.

Raivis and Eduard eyed each other for a moment, a common history passing between them that Tino would never know of. He wouldn’t ask. Some things were better left buried.

Tino tied the apron up and around his waist, shuffling up the stairs to he and Henrik’s bedroom. He knocked twice, and heard a low noise confirming that it was okay for him to enter.

Henrik was sitting on their bed, his legs outstretched with a pillow on his lap as he played on his computer.

“Hjärtanskär,” he said with that happy little smile that was reserved *just* for him.

“Hi, kulta,” Tino greeted fondly, going over to him and sitting on the side of the bed. He kissed the top of his head and wrapped an arm around his shoulder. Henrik leaned into the embrace. He was so happy these days, his eyes almost always crinkling at such small things, even when Tino himself wasn’t around. He would catch him smiling as he worked on this or that as he engrossed himself in his work, not even seeming to notice that he was doing it at all.

“How have you been doing?”

“Good,” Henrik answered. “Been gathering materials. Almost have enough to build a new house.”

“Really?” Tino asked, fiddling with his boyfriend’s hair as he played. “Are you modeling it after something this time?”

Henrik gave a little huff. “You’ll see,” he said, like it was something he was doing *just* for Tino and that he wanted to surprise him.

Of course, he thought that was adorable, and rewarded him with a soft kiss to the top of his head, to which he let out a happy hum, leaning in further to Tino’s embrace.

“...You’re wearing Tolys’ apron,” Henrik said after a minute.

“Oh—yes,” Tino said, looking down at himself, “I forgot I wanted to ask you—do you want to make dinner with me?”

He positively glowed at the idea, slamming his computer shut and rising to his feet.

“...Love to do that,” he said, holding his hand out for Tino to take it. He did so, and they walked with interlaced fingers down the stairs and into the kitchen.

They were lucky that Tolys hadn’t already started to make dinner yet. His cookbook was splayed out on the counter, and a few pots were on the stove, but no actual food had been prepared yet.

“My mother gave me one of her Finnish cookbooks before I left,” Tino said as he put a few pots away. “We could look for something to make in there.”

“Hm,” Henrik hummed, looking around the kitchen. “Sounds good.”

Tino finished with his task and walked over to the cabinets, above his head—pushing himself on the tips of his toes. He was able to reach the knob and pull it open—but found himself unable to grab what he was looking for.

“Kulta,” he called, “mind helping me?”

Henrik blinked at him for a moment before walking behind him and putting his hands on Tino’s waist. He gave him a brief peck on the cheek and tightened his grasp, lifting him up into the air so that he could see into the cabinet.

“See what you’re lookin’ for?” he asked.

Tino’s posture immediately straightened in surprise, “Wh—what are you doing?” he sputtered.

“Helpin’,” Henrik said, with a voice laden with sap and sweet honey.

Tino relaxed and reached into the cabinet, pulling out the cookbook and laughing as he did so. “You’re ridiculous,” he said as Henrik lowered him to sit on the counter.

He smiled that mischievous little smile, looking up at him with sparkling eyes as he whispered his next words. “I know.”

Tino leaned forward and gently kissed his lips, running his fingers through his hair before breaking away. “You’re so soft,” Tino said.

“Mm, you think so?”

“Yes,” Tino teased gently, “You act all stiff and serious around everyone else—but for me you just...” he paused, trying to think of the word. “Melt.”

He nodded, acknowledging the truth in the sentiment before backing away so Tino could get himself off the counter. He did so and placed the cookbook down where he had been sitting.

“Can’t help it,” Henrik said, wrapping his hands around Tino’s waist again and holding himself close. “You’re cute.”

“You are too,” Tino said, leaning back and angling his head up so he could look at Henrik.

He blushed.

“...Thanks,” he said shyly.

Maybe he didn’t believe it, but he was telling the truth. Henrik was *incredibly* cute. He was always so shy...so soft and gentle and just—lovely to talk to. He was a good listener, and he always had something to contribute to the conversation without having to verbally interject. Tino was able to know what he was going to say from just his facial expressions alone. Surprisingly, he was quite passionate about debate in that way.

“Now, what were we doing again?” Tino teased, looking back down to the cookbook and leaning his cheek against Henrik’s shoulder.

“Mm, right,” he laid out the book in front of them. They flipped through the pages together, with half lidded eyes laden with affection until Henrik stopped him, pointing to a dish on the 20th page labeled ‘Lihapullat’. He seemed to recognize it somewhat—perhaps it was something similar to a dish he had prepared before.

“We could make that,” he said. His eyes scanned the recipe, but he quickly gave up, as he didn’t understand the Finnish on the page.

“I can translate it for you,” Tino hummed. “It’s an easy recipe.”

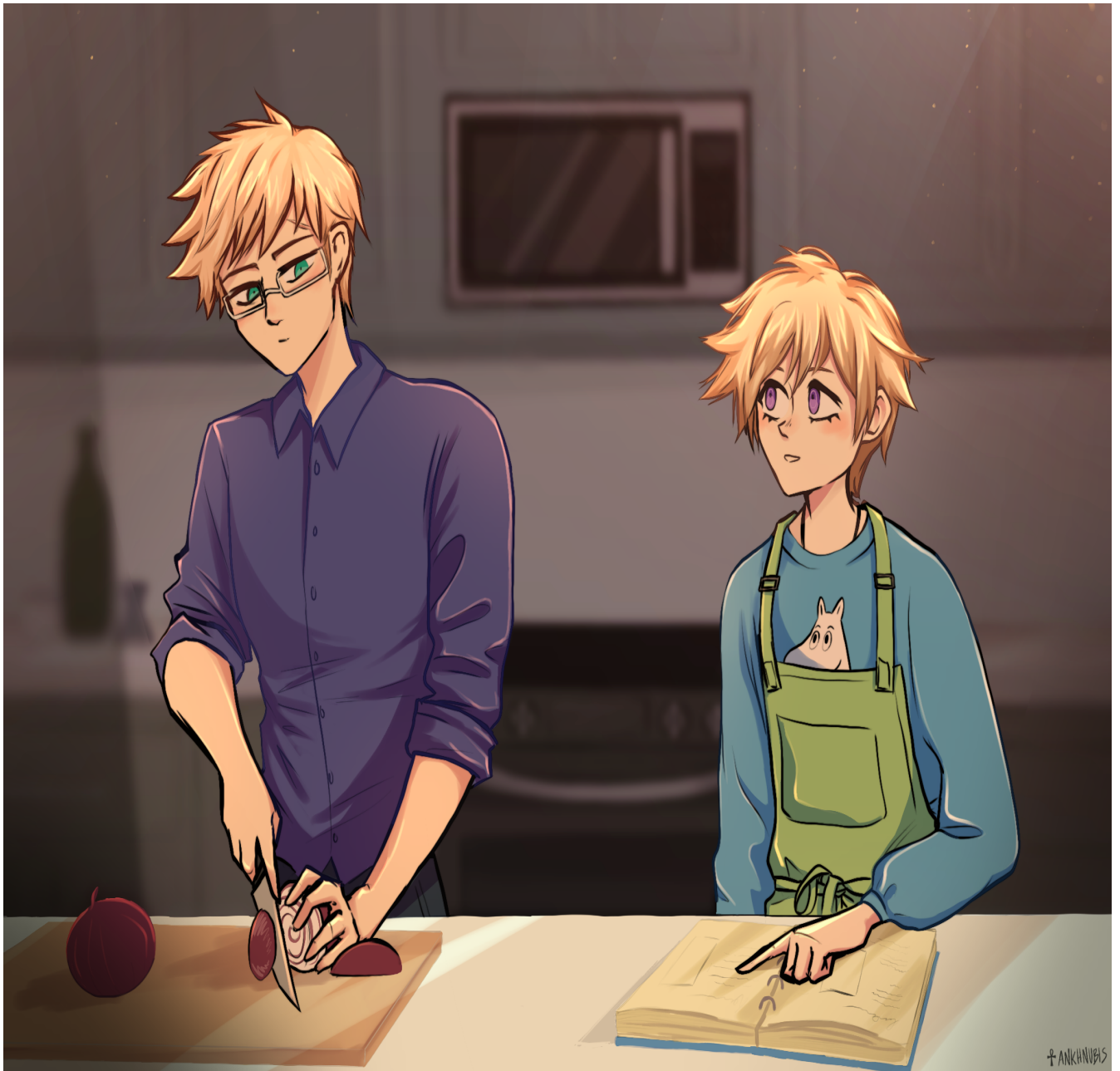
“Mm,” Henrik nodded. He went over to the opposite countertop and rolled up his sleeves before cleaning his hands in the sink.

“Okay!” Tino said with a little clap of his hands before taking the book and looking up to Henrik. He read over the words for a moment before translating them for his boyfriend.

“We’re going to need,” he cleared his throat in preparation for the long list of ingredients, “1 pound of ground beef, 2 slices of bread to be made into crumbs, ½ cup of half-and-half cream, 1 small diced onion, 1 teaspoon of olive oil,” Henrik had gotten to work in gathering ingredients before he even finished, “1 egg, salt and pepper, 1 tablespoon of olive oil, 2 tablespoons of butter, and 2 tablespoons of flour.”

His boyfriend had seemed to already know where everything was—he must’ve been preparing for a day where he would have to cook. He was extremely good at following instructions too—and Tino hardly ever had to correct him when he was preparing the dish. He liked seeing him so hard at work

like that, and it was endearing. It took him no time at all to break the bread slices into crumbs and combine them with the cream, and it somehow took him less time to chop the onion and combine it (along with the egg and the ground beef) to that mixture. He was very efficient.



“Season it with salt, pepper, and allspice, and then mix it into the shape of a ball and put it in the pan,” Tino said.

Henrik obliged, and together they waited as he placed the little meatballs in the pan—watching as they turned that beautiful brown shade and smelling the wonderful scent they let off. Dare he say, this was better than when his mother prepared it.

When all the batches of meatballs were done, Henrik added the butter to the pan, stirring in the flour and letting it cook for a minute or two. As Tino instructed, he added the water and boiled it, stirring the substance until it was of a thick and bubbly consistency for the gravy.

When that was finished he added the meatballs to it, and let it cook for a couple more minutes until Tino finally deemed them to be done.

“Now for the final test,” Tino laughed as he picked up one of the meatballs and put it to his lips.

Henrik gave him a challenging little smirk, like he was daring him to say that it was anything but delicious.

He placed it in his mouth. And it was—by god it was. Somehow, it was able to zip him right back to his childhood remembering long forgotten memories, when he and his family would sit around the table and eat together—having finished eating hours ago but still remaining at the table. He could hardly bring himself to swallow it—it just tasted so wonderful.

“Kulta—you’re an amazing chef!”

He gave a satisfied little huff. “Knew you’d like it,” he said.

Tino hugged him tightly. “You *have* to cook more often!”

“Hm, maybe I will,” he chuckled.

When they had served the meal to the rest of their roommates, they were equally enamored with Henrik’s cooking skill. Eduard had devoured his meal and had happily served himself seconds—while Raivis ate what could be considered a normal portion—a far cry from the miniscule amount he usually ate. He appeared to have liked it a lot.

Tolys didn’t come back until the late hours of the night—when it was far past a decent rising hour. Tino and Henrik had only been awake because they had been busy using his telescope. They scrambled down the stairs to meet them—and were soon joined by Raivis, as he too seemed to be awake.

Tolys and Feliks had messy hair and red eyes. It looked like they had been crying a lot.

“Feliks is going to be staying here for the next few days.” Tolys said, brushing past the three of them and up the stairs. As far as Tino could tell, he was taking him to the guest room to sleep.

“...How peculiar,” Raivis mused. He locked eyes with Henrik for a moment and then slunk back upstairs, apparently having nothing more to say on the matter.

His boyfriend simply shrugged, taking Tino by the hand and leading him back up the stairs, to continue their adventures in stargazing.

Chapter 18

Chapter Notes



Tino had thought he'd been quiet enough getting ready that morning. He had spent a couple of hours on his make-up, which he had used to carve heavy age lines into his youthful face, and attach a realistic silver beard to. His figure was covered by a large fat suit, which was concealed by a classic red and white santa costume. Christmas was approaching—and it was nearly time for his little scheme to take action. Tino pulled heavy black boots over his feet and tossed a black duffle bag over his shoulder. His other supplies were waiting for him in his car. If it had been any other person that he shared a room with, he could've snuck out without a soul noticing. Of course though, it was Henrik. He was such a light sleeper...

His boyfriend sat up in bed, lightly blinking his eyes and pushing his glasses on, but even with his clear vision he seemed unable to truly recognize him.

“...Tino?”

“Ah! Good morning, kulta!” he replied, stopping himself as he was about to leave the room. He turned his head around, but his fingers remained around the cool door handle. When their gazes met, his posture relaxed. Perhaps he thought that his lilac eyes were too distinct to belong to anyone else.

“Um...Where you goin’?...Dressed like that...?”

Tino felt himself sweating a little, but he quickly wiped it away, not wanting to ruin the hours of hard work he had spent on his face.

“...To the mall,” he laughed in a stilted, awkward fashion. “Just going to do some Christmas shopping.”

“Oh,” Henrik said.

There was a tense silence, and Tino probably would've reached under his costume and yanked at the cross necklace that lay underneath it if it hadn't been so far beneath his reach.

“...Mind if I come?” Henrik asked a bit shyly, “...Have some Christmas shoppin’ I need to do...”

No, he couldn't, he couldn't allow him to. It was out of the question.

“Not at all!”

...He was just too cute to resist.

Henrik gave him that happy little smile he always did, with slightly upturned lips and crinkling eyes. He tore himself out of the bed, not even asking Tino to turn around as he changed out of the joggers he slept in and into a red and green flannel and a pair of blue jeans.

After a few more minutes of getting ready, they were off—their hands remaining intertwined all the way through the car ride as Henrik drove. This time, the music that played over the car's speakers was a mix of Tino's Metallica, and Henrik's ABBA.

The volume remained consistently loud throughout the entire trip.

When they eventually arrived at the mall, Tino insisted that Henrik drop him off in the most obscure entrance possible. He had given him a quizzical stare, but did what was asked of him. Tino pulled his supplies out of the car—a metal fold up chair, a sign with incredibly delicate cursive (which had taken Tino *more* than a few tries to get to his liking) which read ‘\$5 to sit with Santa’ on it, and a large

black duffel bag. He was met by another questioning stare from his boyfriend but Tino paid it no mind.

“I’ll be inside,” Tino said hastily, “don’t try and find me. I’ll text you when it’s time to go.”

Henrik narrowed his eyes slightly, but shrugged, driving the car away as soon as Tino took a step back from it. When he was gone from sight, Tino took a deep breath, straightened his posture, and prepared himself for his favorite time of year.

The mall was a bit dingy, like it was way past its heyday and was now slowly falling into a financial slump. Not that most shopping centers like this *weren’t* though. There were all sorts of cheesy Christmas decorations around, like the snowflakes that fell from the sections of glass ceiling, or the bright red and green ornament decals on the floor. Of course, he wouldn’t even bring up the ridiculous amount of ‘sale’ posters he saw, depicting elves and reindeer as they declared that the products inside the store were ‘up to 60% off’. God knew he would need that kind of discount with the amount of things he would be buying. That is, if everything went to plan.

Obviously, this was something he did annually, how could he not? He loved Christmas and all the things that came with it, *especially* when it came to making young children happy. He loved to see the smiles on their little faces when they met his eyes. He’d really love to be a father one day. He’d really love to have a family one day too. Where he and Henrik would sit on the couch of their home together, happily watching as their children tore open Christmas presents from the both of them. They would be sipping on hot chocolate, and the fire would be crackling in the fireplace. It would all be so...breathlessly wonderful. He really couldn’t help it, he was a family man. He always had been, and he always would be.

He hoped that Henrik would be too—and as much as he seemed to loathe taking care of that kid, Nicu, he appeared to be rather good at it. That boy liked him a lot, clinging to him and asking him not to leave—even going as far as to say that he didn’t like Mathias and preferred to play with Henrik. (And honestly, who could possibly dislike Mathias?) He had been firm when he needed to be, yet he still remained as gentle as he always was. Henrik would be a good dad too. He was a good listener too, as he had done what he’d asked—not trying to find him inside. He set up shop in the center of the mall plaza, sitting down in his little fold up chair and waiting for the children to come to him—to sit on his lap and tell him what they’d like for Christmas.

It didn’t take long until they did.

He loved to listen to what they had to say, whispering that they’d like toy trains, and the newest gaming console, and dolls of all kinds. Truly, children were one of the greatest joys of life.

After several long hours, he packed up his things, sneaking off into a family bathroom and changing out of his costume. He placed the remains in his black duffel bag—which at this point was overflowing with cash—and replaced it with a simple black t-shirt and jeans. He wasn’t careful with removing his beard and make-up as it had been on for far too long and was starting to irritate him. But he was hardly done with his task for the day.

He pulled all the cash from the duffel bag and began to sort it, taking the biggest bills and stuffing them into his pockets. He had *more* than enough to pay for what he needed. For the next several hours, he wandered around the mall, shopping for presents until he couldn’t carry anything anymore. His favorite gift however, was what he got for his boyfriend. A stuffed enderman plushie. Those monsters had always been Henrik’s favorite, which was a good thing, because they reminded Tino a lot of him.

Henrik was at his side as soon as he texted him. He had initially given him a little look of surprise, which quickly vanished as he took some of Tino's things into his arms.

"...All done?" he asked.

"Yeah," Tino said with a hearty and exhausted sigh.

Of course though, the universe wouldn't let him off that easily.

"Sir?" called a voice from behind them.

A police officer.

Fuck.

He didn't bother to take in the man's appearance, whipping around and attempting to hide his distinctly coloured eyes. Would he recognize him? He hoped not. Had he gotten the chance to see him. Briefly, he berated himself internally for not thinking to order brown contacts for his eyes before reminding himself that he was probably overthinking things. Afterall, eyes were very hard to see from far away. His anxiety was getting the best of him again. Really, there was nothing to worry about. But, he could be wrong. He decided to keep his eyes hidden, regardless if the police officer had seen them or not.

"Sorry to bother you two," came the gruff voice of the officer, "We've been looking for someone, have either of you two seen a mall santa around here? He's been working without a permit."

Tino pushed his teeth together, praying to God that he wouldn't recognize him.

"Nope," Henrik said, giving the man a heavy glare. "Seen no one like that." God he was hot when he wore an expression like that.

"...Hm," grunted the police officer, sounding slightly unnerved. He looked down at Tino for a moment before turning and walking from them, twirling a pair of handcuffs at his belt like he was trying to appear intimidating. "Be on the lookout then."

Tino and Henrik quickly began to shuffle to the exit.

"No permit, hm?" Henrik teased.

"Stop it!" Tino said in a hushed voice, "You're gonna get us caught!"

"Us?" Henrik asked.

"Yes, *us*!"

He gave a playful scoff. "What's my role then? I didn't do anything."

Tino glanced behind him, to see that the cop was still watching them as they pushed out of the mall's doors.

"Just an accomplice!" Tino shouted, plunging his hand into Henrik's back pocket and pulling out his car keys. He didn't take the time to notice how he reacted, simply clicking the buttons until he saw where it was parked. "Come on, come on!" Tino shouted to him as he ran towards it.

Henrik once again didn't question him, and threw all the things in his arms into the back before moving into the passenger's side. Tino hopped into the driver's seat and slammed the car into reverse, pulling it out of the spot it was parked in and out of the lot.

The music in his car was roaring, heavy metal pounding at the speakers until the entire car was shaking.



“Hold on tight!” Tino yelled, slamming the car's brakes before switching the gears.

Henrik looked at him, giving him what was probably the mushiest expression he'd ever seen him make. He put his hand over Tino's on the gearstick.

“Didn't know you were such a criminal,” he said in teasing.

Tino laughed at him, launching the car into drive and smiling as the wind from the open windows hit his face.

“Only a little bit!” He replied.

“*Please*, tell me that you’re gonna be coming home with a dog,” Eduard said, watching Tino and Henrik walk to the door. “*Please*.”

Henrik really had no idea why he was so enthusiastic about the idea—perhaps he was a dog person.

“I don’t know *what* Kiku wanted to talk about,” Tino said, looking back to Henrik for a moment, “but trust me, I’ll call you if we get anywhere *near* that direction.”

“Well, I hope you two have fun,” Tolys said. He was sitting in the living room, playing a card game with Feliks, who seemed to be actively avoiding making eye contact with both he and Tino at the door. Henrik made note of the fact that Raivis wasn’t downstairs, which wasn’t *unusual* for him, but it seemed that he was hardly outside of his room anymore.

“Thanks,” Tino said with a smile, “I really just want to know what that call was about.”

Henrik made a little grunt in agreement. He had hardly met the animal, but Tino seemed really excited to see her. He had been really anxious about it last night. He kept tossing and turning in his sleep, waking up and walking around. It was hardly like him at all, since he usually slept very soundly and couldn’t be woken up no matter how hard anyone tried. Because of his restlessness, Henrik was hardly able to get any sleep himself—always waking up every time Tino kicked him or rolled over or hugged him tightly. It had been a *very* long night.

“Bye everyone! We’ll be back soon!” Tino said with a cheerful smile. With their hands clasped together, they stepped out the door.

Even though he’d lived in California for quite awhile, he was still slightly saddened that there would be no snow for Christmas this year. He’d always liked that...it was something that really brought the whole season together. ...Not to mention that it would probably make a certain Christmas loving *friend* of his very happy. He supposed he’d have to settle. He could live without snow, especially because they had all those ridiculous decorations Tino had put up both inside and outside the house. Their home looked like it was straight out of the north pole, with all those colorful, blinking lights and statues... Though, Henrik had to note, that a few of them seemed to be broken, as the ones closest to Tino’s car only ever remained green—never wavering in their hue.

He and Tino strode over to his car, sliding into their usual seats. When they were settled, Henrik reversed out of the driveway.

And just for a moment, he allowed his eyes to linger on the park across the street, watching the children play. He’d really like to have a family of his own someday... He looked down at Tino next to him, who—as always—insisted on holding his hand as they drove together. He was nodding his head, mouthing lyrics to some Metallica song as it played over the speakers. And Tino would be the perfect man to have that family with.

He pulled their interlocked palms up and kissed Tino’s hand, which earned him a playful little laugh before he went back to what he had been doing before. Maybe he wasn’t perfect, but he was pretty damn great.

There was a while of silence between them before either spoke again, Tino, drumming his fingers against the dashboard while Henrik kept his attention on the road ahead. His boyfriend seemed to have a lot on his mind, as he had been *unusually* quiet. It wasn’t like their usual silences—there was something *off* about it.

“...So uh—” Henrik began, glancing at Tino briefly before returning his gaze in front of him. “What’s the dog look like?”

Tino blinked for a moment. “Hm? Oh.” He turned his attention away from the dashboard and squeezed the hand that held his own. “Don’t you remember?”

“No,” That was *basically* true. He’d only seen her for a very *brief* moment. But because of the circumstances involved in that incident...he’d been paying attention to a few other things...

“Oh,” Tino said again. He scratched the back of his neck. “Well—she’s really small—maybe about seven pounds? She has fluffy white fur and big dark eyes—and I think she’s young—but I’m not sure about that.”

He was speaking very strangely.

...Was he alright?

Henrik broke their hands apart and turned down the volume of the music. Soothingly, he began to rub his boyfriend’s leg in an act of comfort.

“You doin’ okay?”

Tino looked at him for a moment and sighed, putting his hand over Henrik’s.

“Yes—sorry. I’m just stressed—that’s all.”

“Nothin’ to be nervous about,” Henrik assured him.

Tino shook his head.

“Yes I know, it’s just...” He looked to the window for a second, looking incredibly ashamed.

“...Withdrawal symptoms...” He grabbed at the cross around his neck. “...Makes my anxiety worse, among other things.”

...So that’s what was bothering him. It made sense, but it still broke his heart that Tino was still so upset about it. He didn’t judge him for it—not in the slightest.

“Don’t feel guilty,” Henrik said. “It’s okay.”

Tino was silent next to him.

“Been through this process before—with Lukas. It worked out for him. It’ll work out for you too.”

Lukas’ withdrawal symptoms had certainly been...something. He was already someone who was easily irritated—which was something that had only been exacerbated by his quitting. Still though, with enough perseverance, he overcame it. And if Lukas could do it, Tino could too.

Again Tino said nothing, but he stopped rubbing at his neck. Instead, he leaned in on Henrik’s outstretched arm.

“...Thanks,” he said after a long moment of quiet.

“No problem.”

It was silent for the remainder of the car ride.

When they arrived, his mood seemed to have significantly improved—anxiety replaced by excitement.

“...You think she has a name?” Henrik asked as the two of them exited the car.

“Are you saying we should name her?” Tino smiled a little.

“...If you wanna.”

“Hm,” Tino paused in thought. When the two of them were next to each other again, he wrapped his arm around Henrik’s as the two of them began to walk up to the animal shelter. He pulled himself a bit closer. “...What do you think about...Special Attack?”

...As a name?

“Um—,” he stuttered, perplexed.

“Or...Somersault Son!” Suddenly, he was very enthusiastic.

“Uh—” Henrik grunted again, “She’s a girl. Isn’t she?”

“Oh! You’re right!” He straightened in his excitement, walking ahead slightly to see Henrik’s face—stepping backwards and keeping their hands linked. “We can’t name her something like that! She’s a lady!”

...His boyfriend was very strange sometimes...

All the more reason to love him of course.

“Sardine Picnic! Or Cheese Manor!” he shouted.

Where on *Earth* was he coming up with these names?

“Uh—yeah,” Henrik agreed weakly, nodding his head with an unconvincing grimace of a smile.

Tino didn’t seem to notice—too lost in his own world. “Oh! I got it!”

Henrik could only beg that it was something vaguely normal.

For all that was even somewhat holy...*please*.

“What about Bomb Bastard?!” he exclaimed with a brilliant smile.

Bomb Bastard

That was the name that his beautiful, awe-inspiring, boyfriend had picked for a small white female dog. Tino was eccentric in the strangest ways...

Henrik was saved from having to answer him by them arriving at the door of the animal shelter. He pulled it open and ushered Tino inside—desperate to escape the question.

It was a cute little place, with light brown tiles and blue wallpaper that had pictures of little cats and dogs on them. In the middle of the room was a small counter, behind which was a short man. He had dark brown eyes and black hair that went all the way down to his ears. He was very small—much shorter than Henrik at least. He must’ve been Kiku. To their left was a small set of a few shelves,

displaying different kinds of pet food and toys, and behind Kiku was a set of double doors, doubtlessly where all the animals were kept.

Kiku shifted back slightly when he met his eyes, which Henrik tried not to take offense to.

“Tino,” Kiku greeted, “thank you for coming.”

“My pleasure,” he cheered back happily.

Kiku stepped out from behind the counter and gestured for Tino to follow him. He spoke politely, but it seemed that he was rather eager to get his attention. “Please, follow me to the back.” He waited patiently at the doors until Tino and Henrik made it over to him and then ushered them inside.

The back of the animal shelter was decidedly less adorable than the front. It was a stark white—with most of the color coming from the inside of little cages and kennels as they were filled with colorful blankets and pillows. There weren’t many dogs around, cats taking up the majority of the shelter’s space. After a while of walking, Kiku led them around a corner, which revealed another man crouching and trying to coax an animal out of its kennel. He had broad shoulders and a tired disposition. His eyes—which were a pretty olive green, were almost completely shut. He had a black cat standing on his shoulders.

“Heracles,” Kiku said.

The other man moved, standing up to his full height as he stepped away. Miraculously, the cat remained on his shoulders, sitting on top of them and eyeing Tino and Henrik curiously. This man didn’t react to Henrik at all, which might’ve been surprising had it not been for how tired he looked. He seemed to be so exhausted that he wasn’t taking in any of their surroundings. Kiku ushered Tino and Henrik closer, and the three of them crouched around the entrance of the cage.



Inside was a small white maltese, shivering and whimpering in her cage and closing her eyes as Kiku attempted to reach for her. He cooed to her, calling her something in Japanese before sighing and

looking back to Tino and Henrik.

“You see, this is why I wanted to talk to you.”

That poor dog looked absolutely terrified.

“Her original owner couldn’t take her back, and so we’ve been trying to find her a home...” His eyes fell slightly and his co-worker continued for him.

“It seems that she went through something extremely traumatic, as she doesn’t trust anyone at all,” he said sleepily. To say that she had gone through something traumatic would be the understatement of the century.

“So, what we’re trying to ask is,” Kiku began to say, shifting so he faced Tino. “Where did you find this dog?”

His boyfriend shifted back on his heels and he ran a hand through his straw blond hair. “Oh, well—” He grabbed at the cross around his neck, and Henrik immediately put a hand on his back to soothe him. “I pulled her out of a burning building.”

Kiku looked to be very surprised, while his co-worker remained stoic.

“Yeah—that’d be it,” Heracles said.

Tino readjusted his jacket in discomfort.

“She’s been getting worse,” Kiku said. “She hardly eats, and she’s lost weight. I worry that without a home she’ll get worse.” He straightened his posture. “This is why I got in contact with you. Please understand my desperation but...she seemed to trust you last we spoke.” That had certainly been weeks ago though. Was he implying that he wanted them to adopt her? Or at the *very* least foster her? Henrik had never owned a pet before...And would Tino be okay with that? Their roommates seemed to be at least...

“Oh,” Tino said. He shifted to his knees and peered into the kennel, looking to see the small dog inside.

Hardly a second flew by before she was in Tino’s arms, licking his face and wiggling excitedly in his grip.

“Ah!” Kiku exclaimed, clapping his hands together over his chest.

Heracles joined them in crouching, the cat on his shoulders meowing in intrigue as it put its paws on the man’s head to lean in further. “...You told me so,” he said in a tired, monotone voice.

Tino looked incredibly happy—all that anxiety seeming to leave his body as he squeezed her tightly. She wagged her tail in enthusiastic response. It looked like he was in heaven.

After a moment he spoke again. “...So, are you saying we can keep her?”

His use of ‘*we*’ did not go unnoticed by Henrik.

“You don’t have to adopt her,” Kiku said, “But if you could foster her for a while it would be greatly appreciated. We could compensate you for your time as well, as I know we’re asking a lot of you.”

Tino locked eyes with Henrik for a moment, asking a question they both already knew the answer to. He turned back to Kiku. “That won’t be necessary.” Tino said. “We’re adopting her.”

“Oh,” Kiku replied, looking somewhat taken aback before going back to a more neutral expression. “Please then, come up to the front. I’ll get the paperwork for you.”

The four of them stood, and Kiku and Heracles led them back through to the front of the store. Kiku brought them to the counter, while Heracles went to the shelves to their left, doubtlessly gathering a few items for them.

And like some kind of demonic intervention, Tino suddenly made a loud exclamation.

“Oh! Kulta, I’ve got it! Her name!” he yelled, holding the puppy high up in the air, “How about Blood-Covered Flower Egg?!”

Blood-Covered Flower Egg.

Blood-Covered Flower Egg.

Where the *fuck* was he coming up with these names?

He looked to Kiku—to Heracles, silently begging for assistance, but they were...unhelpful. Kiku cleared his throat and let out an awkward laugh, while Heracles simply turned his head, blinking a few times before returning to his task. The cat on his shoulders at least yowled in disapproval.

“Uh—Hjärtanskär,” Henrik began to say.

“...You could name her Larry,” Heracles suggested. “That’s *her* name.” He gestured to the cat on his back. That was hardly any better.

“How about Hanatamago? It’s Japanese for ‘Flower-Egg,’ Kiku suddenly interjected, like he desperately didn’t want to update their website with the news that they had adopted a dog under the name ‘Blood-Covered Flower Egg.’

Really, that was the best they were going to get.

“Mm,” Henrik grunted. “Like that one.”

“Oh! Really?” Tino said, bouncing on his toes in excitement, “I like that one too! Let’s do it! We can call her ‘Hana’ for short!” His boyfriend moved closer to him, and Henrik wrapped an arm around his shoulder. The dog moved away from him slightly in Tino’s arms, but he paid it no mind.

“Mm,” Henrik said.

“Wonderful,” Kiku said with a slightly relieved expression. He pulled out a paper from the counter in front of him and pushed it forward for Tino to sign. “Please fill out these forms, then she will be yours.”

He got to work on that, while Heracles came over—his arms filled with various supplies including dog food, a small bed, two bowls, and a bone shaped squeaky toy. He handed them over to Henrik.

“...Do you want a custom name tag?” Heracles asked lazily.

Henrik gave him a singular nod, and he turned on his heels, going back to the shelves for a moment. He returned with a rolling cart of dog collars.

“Please choose one while I get that for you.”

He disappeared into the back.

There were many different choices, coming in all sorts of colors. Of course, the one that immediately grabbed his attention was the one near the top—which was a soft pink. He elbowed Tino lightly to get his attention.

“Like that one?”

His boyfriend grimaced in distaste. “No,” his eyes scanned the rack for a moment, “Oh! But what about that one?!”

Of course he was pointing to the collar near the bottom, which was jet black and had spikes poking out of the fabric.

“That’s so badass! We gotta get it!”

...It wasn’t out of character for him, but still, sometimes he had to remind himself of Tino’s strange taste. He was eccentric in the weirdest of ways.

Henrik looked a little longer—and was slightly surprised to find there was a similar collar to the one Tino had picked out. The only difference was that instead of being black, it was a cute shade of pink.

“Compromise?” he asked with a small gleam in his eye.

“Compromise,” Tino agreed.

Heracles quickly returned, handing over a silver tag with ‘Hanatamago’ engraved on it. Henrik attached it to the collar and clicked it around her neck.

“Welcome to the family,” he muttered.

“Yeah! Welcome to the family!” Tino exclaimed, signing the paper with a final flick of his pen. With a quick glance at it, Henrik was very happy to see that he had written both of their names down on the form.

After paying and a short phone call to their roommates to explain the news, the two of them returned home. Their three roommates (even Raivis...to an extent) had been incredibly enthusiastic about it. Perhaps they were *all* animal lovers.

The entire car ride, Hana had stuck her little head out of the open window, wagging her tail and panting happily as the loud heavy metal blasted out of the speakers. It seemed that just by being in Tino’s presence, she was much better. Henrik couldn’t really fault her for that.

Tino had warned their roommates over the phone that she probably wouldn’t like to be held by anyone *other* than him. Still though, they were a bit disappointed. As soon as Feliks had seen Tino and Henrik, he darted up the stairs, seeming to be too shy to want to talk to them. When Eduard came over to greet them at the door and pet her, she whimpered, which left their roommate with a sad little expression on his face. It was the same case for Raivis, though, Henrik could really only *assume* he was upset, as he gave a little huff before turning around and disappearing back upstairs. But what had

happened with Tolys was strange. Because the moment that he was in Hana's sight, she wiggled out of Tino's arms and ran over to him, barking happily and licking his face.



“...Do you know her?” Tino asked, confused as he approached Tolys. Henrik followed him. “Kiku said that she hardly trusts anyone!”

Tolys gave a slow little nod before looking back to Tino, patting the dog in his lap. “Um, yeah,” he said, “...she was Ivan’s dog.”

As the room was empty save for the three of them—the usual chorus of groans that came from the mention of his name were absent. Tino scrunched up his nose slightly, but otherwise said nothing. Henrik could tell that Tino had been biting his tongue, but he still had no idea why. And for the first time since he’d seen Tino react to that name, he didn’t seem to have quite the same amount of resentment as usual.

Henrik didn’t have much of a relationship with that guy. He knew him, sure, but he didn’t *know* him. They’d gone to high school together—but they’d never really spoken. Their exchanges had been mostly violent, trading fists rather than words. But again, that was a long time ago, and mostly egged on by Mathias. Henrik didn’t really have a personal problem with Ivan, but he *did* want to protect his best friend from getting his ass kicked back in the day. Mathias was truly a terrible fighter, he couldn’t defend himself even if his opponent had their hands tied behind their back. But that was a *long* time ago.

Henrik supposed Ivan had tutored Emil in chemistry last year but Henrik had hardly been around for that. But if there was one thing he knew about that guy, it was this: In all of the time they had known of each other, he’d only ever seen him without his scarf once—and it wasn’t because he chose to.

Tolys squeezed her a little, whispering in her ear for a moment before surrendering her to Tino. He stood up. “You don’t need to react like that,” he said. “He’s really not a bad guy.” He went back upstairs, probably to see what Feliks was up to now that they’d been so briefly separated.

“...You okay?” Henrik asked gently, pulling Tino over to sit on the couch.

“Yeah,” Tino mumbled, running his hands through the dog’s fur as she moved to sit between their laps. “...At least he had the decency to know when he couldn’t keep her.” He said the words almost contemptuously—but from the look on his face, Henrik could tell that he was confused. That maybe...just *maybe*, Ivan wasn’t as bad as he thought he was.

Chapter 19

Chapter Notes



Christmas was getting closer and closer every day, and Tino would be damned if he let anyone forget it. Now that Henrik was *officially* a part of their little household, he had insisted on making him a stocking for the mantle—Feliks too (even though he was just a guest—Tolys had said that he was going to be staying for Christmas).

So now they sat in the living room with Hana between them embroidering names on stockings. Tino, obviously, was working on Henrik's, while he was working on Feliks'.

He must've embroidered all the other stockings on the mantle, as the other ones had the same common mistakes. The spacing was off, or the lining was crooked in some way, and sometimes the thread was thicker in some places than in others. All of these were issues that Henrik easily noticed but he didn't bother to point them out. Because all of those little mistakes...were just so incredibly...*Tino*.

It had been a pretty quiet day all things considered—Tolys and Feliks were chatting upstairs in one of their rooms (whose it was Henrik couldn't be sure), and Eduard had been busy working on some project or another—telling everyone not to bother him as whatever he was doing was extremely important, though, when Henrik had walked past his room, he'd heard this unmistakable chords of some kind of pan flute that sounded like they were coming out of a computer. Finally, there was Raivis, who Henrik hadn't properly seen in a day or two. He was practically a ghost at this point.

Tino cursed in Finnish under his breath as he brought his hand out from the folds of the stocking he was embroidering. It was incredibly beat up, with several bandages around each finger. This new injury was a single bloody prick on his ring finger.

...He was a bit aggressive when it came to making crafts...

"Need another bandaid?" Henrik asked.

"...Yes please," Tino sighed.

Henrik put his own project down and reached to his side for a new bandage from the pack he had brought over. After three trips to get a new one, he figured it would be better to just bring the box over. He tore open the paper and gently wrapped it around his boyfriend's finger, kissing it affectionately before surrendering it back to him. Hana seemed to dislike their sudden movements, as she yipped and stood up from where she was, going to Tino's either side and sitting down next to him.

"Thanks," Tino said.

"No problem, hjärtanskär."

It was quiet again for a while.

...Until Tino pricked his finger again.

"God damn it!" he exclaimed, shaking his hand from the sting. This time he'd hurt his palm, leaving a light gash where the needle had struck him. All of these injuries were ones that would fade in the coming days, but he still hated to see his boyfriend bleeding like this. Henrik studied the wound, and came to the conclusion that it was too long to use a regular bandage.

"...Gonna need a bigger one," he said.

Tino shook his head. "Yeah," he sighed, "I know." He stood up from the couch, putting his half finished project aside and walking to go into the kitchen to get a larger one. "Be right back," he said.

As soon as he was gone, Hana leapt up and followed him.

Henrik leaned back on the couch, looking over the living room—from the Christmas tree (that had probably been put up in the first week of November), to the incredible amount of bright shining lights that twinkled all around them, he really had to wonder exactly when this obsession started. Perhaps it was because Tino loved his family so much. He had been talking on the phone with them quite a lot these days, presumably wishing them well for the holidays as they went on for *hours*. Of course, Henrik had no idea *what* they were talking about, as Tino was always speaking Finnish over the phone, but he *did* know that he would always stiffly laugh at the same question.

‘Have you gotten yourself a new girlfriend?’

Of course, Henrik only knew that he’d been asked this question so many times because Tino would always awkwardly tell him about it, stating that he was unsure what to do. He’d said that his father knew he was gay but...that was it. It seemed that he was unsure if he should tell them at all—though it seemed that he wanted to. He wanted to share that part of his life with them.

Henrik could hardly blame him. It’s not like he’d ever had that conversation with his own family. Hell, he’d hardly even spoken to them since he graduated high school...So of course he wouldn’t have told them...not that he would’ve known at the time. How exactly could he have explained to them that he hadn’t fallen in love with anyone before, and that when he’d finally managed to find it that it would be with a man...Surely, they wouldn’t have cared but...He had just been bitter about moving; it wasn’t that he didn’t *want* to talk to them, but after so long, he really didn’t know how to reconnect. It had really been four years since he’d last spoken to them...So much had changed.

There was a light creaking from the stairs behind him, and Henrik turned to see Raivis descending from the stairs, bringing with him a nearly empty bottle of vodka. His hair was messy, and his clothes were a bit wrinkled. He clutched tightly to his notebook at his chest before sitting down on the far side of the couch, turning on the TV to those weird Korean dramas he liked to watch, and beginning to write in his little book. He was so secretive about that thing...Tino had said that he wrote poetry in there, but...just from the way that he was scribbling in it while watching that show, there was no way that it was *just* for that. Perhaps he used it as a journal also. Raivis was still so incredibly strange, even after all this time of living together with him. Maybe it was time that he try to figure out that mystery.

“...What are you writin’?” Henrik asked, not looking up from embroidering Feliks’ stocking.

Raivis glanced at him, and he immediately felt it. Those cerulean eyes...dissecting him...It was almost like he was contemplating something before he reached for the TV remote and turned it off. He moved closer to Henrik on the couch.

He stared at him for a long while before he spoke.

“Do you really want to know?” he asked, his words coming out in a quiet whisper.

He really didn’t like the feeling of Raivis’ eyes on him, they were dark, haunting, moon-like...somehow it seemed that he was the embodiment of the night, hidden inside the body of a short young man who liked to wear light red sweaters.

“Um—yes.”

Raivis closed the space between them by moving closer. He pulled his notebook out and let it sit in his lap.

“You must only look where I tell you,” he said. What the *hell* was up with this guy?

Henrik gave a short little nod and placed the embroidery project on the coffee table across from the couch.

Raivis flipped through the pages for a moment, bringing the book close to him so that he was sure Henrik couldn't see anything he didn't want him to.

“...I'm only showing you this because I trust you,” Raivis said.

“Mm.” He grunted, somewhat uneasily.

Raivis shifted in his seat a bit, perhaps uncomfortable with the prospect of sharing something so personal with him. Nonetheless he passed the book over to Henrik revealing...Raivis' absolutely beautiful handwriting. It seemed that these were some of his completed works, as he had cleaned up all of his quick and messy writing into clear, and easy to understand columns. The writing was crafted into a curly and wistful cursive with many spots where it looked like the pen had been flicked up in moments of passion.

And then on to the actual *content* of those passages.

...They were probably some of the most beautiful poems Henrik had ever read. Not that he ever read much at all before Tino but, regardless they were incredibly impressive. They were so striking, and so intriguing. Henrik couldn't help but tear through the pages (with Raivis' permission) as he read on and on. There was so much detail, so much care put into each and every line, every word on the page holding meaning that Henrik was sure he'd never figure out. But there was one thing that they all had in common.

Every single one was about love.

He traced the page with his hand. “Raivis, these are...”

The author of the works looked up at him, a small smile of satisfaction and delight on his face as he stared up at Henrik. “You like them?”

He nodded and turned his attention back to the book that was in front of him. He put his thumb on the edge and flipped to the next page.

“Hey! Wait!”

And even surprising himself, Henrik let out a loud and audible gasp. Because there before him lay a loose sheet of paper, which held an absolutely beautiful drawing of Henrik himself and Tino on it. It was of them sitting together, lovingly staring into each other's eyes as they sat together at The Lucky Dragon. The picture was just...stunning, and captured every little detail of the scene, from the blurred dragons in the background to Tino's wonderful fluffy hair and his sweet smile. He almost looked as good as he did in real life...*almost*. Before Henrik could look at the image any further, Raivis snatched it back, slamming it shut and holding it tightly to his chest.

“I didn't say you could look there!” he snapped, sounding a bit hurt.

“Sorry,” Henrik immediately apologized, “didn't mean to.”

Raivis huffed a little, his cheeks a bright burning red.

“...Um—Did you draw that?”

Raivis looked a bit surprised, raising his eyebrows slightly and sitting back before falling into his regular, neutral expression. “No.”

“Oh,” Henrik said.

There was a tense silence for a moment as Raivis continued to stare at him.

“...Then who did?”

“Yong Soo.”

And it clicked.

That’s why he’d been so sloppy with their orders. It was because, secretly, he had been drawing a picture of them. A light feeling filled his chest, incredibly flattered by the gesture.

“...Can I see it again?”

Raivis was silent for a moment.

“...If you want.”

He flipped the book to the correct page and gave it to Henrik again.

Yong Soo had captured the two of them so perfectly... Henrik wished that he could keep it and give it to Tino, and hang it up on the wall of their room. It was just so...wonderful.

“...You like it that much?” Raivis said. His eyes had remained on his face, obviously being able to read his expression.

He really didn’t like how easily Raivis knew how he was feeling.

“Uh—yeah,” Henrik said. “I do.”

“...Wanna see the other one he did?”

He nodded, and Raivis flipped to the next page. This time, the drawing was taped inside the notebook. It was of Raivis himself, sitting with Yong Soo. He was scribbling in his notebook, as he always was, while Yong Soo was angled a bit away, drawing another picture of him.

Henrik had to wonder if this *too* was a drawing of a real event.

Raivis pulled the other drawing out from the pages and laid it on the open notebook so they could look at both of them.

“He’s amazing isn’t he?” Raivis said, his eyes shutting slightly in an expression of...fondness?

Perhaps he and his project partner had grown a bit closer than he’d thought they could. Maybe he should talk to Yong Soo about how to better understand his roommate, because clearly, he knew him better than Henrik did.

“Want to know something?” Raivis said, taking the notebook back from Henrik and standing. He went over to where he had been sitting and grabbed his bottle of vodka. Henrik only looked at him for

a moment, as Raivis finished off the remainder of the liquid, taking it down without even stopping to breathe.

“Those poems...they were about you and Tino too.”

Before Henrik could respond, he disappeared back up the stairs, hearing the faint click of his door signaling that he had once again locked himself inside his room. All of those poems...about him and Tino...

Henrik fell back on the couch, unsure what to even do with that information. Raivis *did* have a strange tendency of always staring at himself and Tino before scribbling in his notebook. Was it really true that after all this time, he'd been writing about their love? So *that's* what it was all about. Maybe he wasn't so hard to understand after all...Henrik reached forward and picked up his embroidery project again, bringing the needle through the fabric in thought.

“Oh,” he finally managed to say. But Raivis hadn't been listening for his answer, seeming to already know that Henrik was satisfied with his work.

Finally, Tino returned from the kitchen, Hana yipping happily at his feet as he sat down next to Henrik once again. With his return, Raivis quickly retreated up the stairs, almost certainly vanishing into the darkness of his room.

“Miss me?” Tino teased.

“Mm,” Henrik hummed in a playful tone as he leaned over and kissed his cheek. “Too much.”

Tino chuckled a little at that, giving a kiss to the scar on his forehead in return before settling back down with his embroidery project. His hand now had a fresh new bandage, completely covering the wound from before.

Hana jumped up on the couch, and Tino shifted to lean against Henrik's shoulder as he worked, the small dog plopping down and curling up on his lap.

For the rest of the time they worked, it was completely silent.

When they eventually finished, Henrik had decided to add a couple of details to Feliks' stocking, not for any particular reason other than to fill time. He liked the feeling of Tino leaning against him while they worked together. It wasn't anything *too* impressive, just a couple of flowers and the Polish flag (which was where Tolys had briefly mentioned that he was from).

Tino sat up and turned a little. “All done!” he exclaimed happily, showing Henrik the stocking. Just like all his other work, it was janky—with terrible spacing and thread that was obviously a shade or two lighter than the rest of the project but...Henrik still loved it. It was so incredibly...*Tino*. He kissed his boyfriend's lips, bringing his hand to his cheek.

“Love it.”

“Yay!” he exclaimed happily. His boyfriend was such a wonderful man, with such a brilliant, shining smile that could light up the whole room. His beautiful laughter and his loud and boisterous personality. He was crazy in the best way—in a way that made Henrik want to go out and join him (though in a much more subdued way, obviously). He wanted to run with him—to see the world with him—to hold him and kiss him and tell him that he was everything.

Because despite his flaws, he was the best thing that had ever happened to him. It was a damn miracle that he was with him now. And even if the circumstances around them getting to that point weren't exactly the best...He didn't regret it at all, because it led him to a future where he could be with the one and only love of his life. He was the only person who'd ever made him feel that way. And now that he knew what that kind of love was like...he couldn't imagine ever living without it again.

"Hjärtanskär..."

"Yes?" he dragged out the word, giving him a playful little smile as he patted Hana in his lap.

Henrik huffed a small laugh and kissed the top of his head. "...Nothin'."

His boyfriend elbowed him lightly in teasing. "You sure?"

"Mm," Henrik hummed, smiling.

"Okay," he said sarcastically, rolling his eyes and resettling so he could lean against the back of the couch. "Are you finished with yours?"

"Mm."

"You should give it to Feliks then, I'm sure he'd appreciate it." Henrik doubted that. That guy was really shy, and he wasn't sure how he'd react to suddenly having a man such as himself at the door. Regular people were afraid of him already. Still though, he shrugged and stood. It was probably the right thing to do. It was a gift after all.

"Be back soon then," he hummed.

Tino waved a little as he watched him walk up the stairs, and Hana sat up in his lap barking and wagging her tail as she watched him go.

The sound of Feliks and Tolys' laughter filled his ears as he took a left down the hallway, walking to the guest room that he could now hear that they were in.

"Stop it!" came Feliks voice, howling with laughter.

"*You* stop!" Tolys said, giggling along with him.

Henrik stopped outside of the door to the room they were in and knocked on it.

The sound inside stopped for a moment.

"Minty," hissed Feliks' voice, "Who is that?"

'Minty'?

Tolys paused, like he was shrugging. "I'm not sure..." He heard the sound of him standing up and shortly afterward, the door opened slightly.

"Um," Henrik mumbled, unsure of what he was supposed to say. He held up the stocking and handed it to Tolys. "Here."

"Oh!" Tolys gasped, "Did you make this?"

"Mm."

Tolys turned into the door and gestured to Feliks. “Come here, come here,” he said in a gentle, encouraging voice. “You’ll love this!”

Meekly, he met him at the door, shyly avoiding eye contact with Henrik as he took the gift into his hands. He looked at it for a moment.

“...Thank you,” Feliks said quietly. He quickly darted back inside the room.

Tolys leaned in a little and whispered in Henrik’s ear. “He loves it.”

Henrik felt himself smile a little, proud of himself. “I’m glad.” As Tolys moved away, Henrik decided to ask. “‘Minty’?” Tolys immediately turned a bright red.

“Oh,” he laughed a bit awkwardly, “It’s a childhood nickname—you know, Tolmintas was shortened to ‘Minty’...” He fiddled with his fingers, clearly a bit embarrassed.

“It’s okay,” Henrik said with a little smile, “...Mathias still calls me ‘Ricky’.”

At that, Tolys’ face cracked into a smile, chuckling a little. “Really?”

“Mm.”

“Childhood nicknames, huh?” Tolys laughed.

“Mm,” Henrik agreed, beginning to turn away from the door. “...You can call me that too, if you like.”

Tolys laughed again and nodded. “I’ll hold you to that.” he chuckled. The door closed, and Henrik went back downstairs and sat down on the couch, now happy to enjoy the rest of his evening with his beloved and their new pet dog. Well...until his phone started to ring.

“Who’s that?” Tino asked, glancing over to look at his phone.

“Mathias,” Henrik muttered. He answered the call.

“Hey! Buddy! Do you and Tino wanna come to The Lucky Dragon with Lukas, Emil and I? We’re gonna go at 5’ tomorrow!”

Henrik didn’t even need to look at Tino as he nodded his head, somehow able to hear their friend despite the call not being on speaker.

“Oh! That sounds like fun!” Tino said.

And perhaps it was because of a particular drawing Henrik had seen...because he felt a surprising amount of determination to go there again.

“Sure,” Henrik grunted.

“Awesome! See you then!” There was a short click and their call disconnected.

“He’s excited,” Tino laughed.

“He’s Mathias,” Henrik said.

Tino moved closer to him. “And you’re Henrik,” he teased, “my beautiful, wonderful, Henrik.”

“Hm,” Henrik huffed, a small smile forming as he leaned into a gentle little kiss.

“And you’re Tino,” he mumbled, “My hjärtanskär.”

“Hey! Hana!” Tino laughed as she jumped on top of the present he was wrapping. “Stop it!”

“Can’t help that she likes you,” Henrik hummed, looking up to him briefly before sealing the final piece of tape around his own gift.

The two of them were sitting on the floor of their room, wrapping the last few Christmas presents they had. Now, the Christmas tree downstairs was overflowing with gifts, not to mention all the presents that were sitting by the door, all meant for people outside their little household.

Tino picked up the small dog and moved her away, but she once again leapt right over to him.

“Oh, sweet girl,” Tino said softly, scratching her behind the ears. “What am I gonna do with you?”

“Hm,” Henrik huffed slightly, he clapped his hands a few times, and the dog looked over at him curiously. He clicked his tongue and snapped his fingers, but she came no closer. It wasn’t that Hana was *afraid* of Henrik, she was just fine with sitting with him when he and Tino were together, rather it was a matter of sitting with him and him *alone*. Though, somehow, it seemed that she recognized him in a way.

“Go on,” Tino urged from behind her. “It’s okay, you can go over to him.” He patted her back soothingly, and slowly she took a couple of steps forward. “You can do it girl!” She yipped in response.

Henrik clapped his hands again, and she cautiously began to move forward. Her ears were perked, and slowly, she began to sniff at Henrik’s hand, her wet little nose twitching as she thoroughly investigated him. Finally, she licked his palm, and came bounding over, yipping and barking and sitting in his lap.

Henrik smiled happily, and pet the little dog in his lap. “Good thing, huh?”

“Yeah,” Tino immediately agreed, feeling very happy that their dog was learning to become more trusting. Hopefully that would mean that she would be able to be with people *other* than himself, Henrik, and Tolys.

Henrik patted her gently, strong and calloused hands running through her soft fur as she happily panted. He loved seeing the two of them like that. It was just so cute. Honestly, it shocked him that people could *ever* see Henrik as intimidating. Tino moved closer to them both and propped himself up on his knees, leaning over Henrik’s shoulder and wrapping his arms around his neck. He ran his hands through his soft golden blond hair, and pushed his glasses up so they properly sat up on his nose, he held him tight and kissed the back of his cheek until he felt his boyfriend sigh and lean back against him.

“Comfortable?” Tino teased.

“Mm,” Henrik leaned back further and kissed his cheek.

He probably could’ve stayed like that forever, had it not been for the sudden buzzing and ringing of Henrik’s phone.

He groaned and answered it.

“Hey! Ricky! Don’t forget! You, me, Tino, Lukas, and Emil, Lucky Dragon, 5:00.” He said the words in an incredibly stilted manner, not even leaving room for Henrik to say anything in reply. *“See you soon buddy!”*

The phone clicked and the lines disconnected.

“...Someone’s excited,” Tino snickered.

Henrik shook his head in playful exasperation before moving to stand, still holding Hana in his arms. “Always is.”

Tino joined him at his feet, and Henrik handed the dog to him. “Take her down to Tolys. Have one more gift to wrap. Then we can go.”

“One more?” he asked, looking around. “Is there another one?”

“Mm, yours,” Henrik said.

“Oh, I see,” Tino hummed, he kissed his boyfriend’s cheek, “can’t let me see it then.”

He made a little grunt of agreement and he kissed the top of his head. “Be down in a minute though.”

Tino nodded to him and then stepped out, going down the stairs to see Tolys, Eduard, and Feliks chatting downstairs on the couch. They seemed to be having a very nice time, laughing and smiling with such familiarity it was almost like they were family.

“Hey,” Tino said cheerfully as he moved to stand by them. Immediately, Feliks stiffened and moved to sit closer to Tolys.

That man was incredibly shy. Hana wiggled in his arms, probably wanting to go over to Tolys.

“Going somewhere?” Eduard asked, flipping his shining blond hair and flashing a charming little smile. “On a date maybe?”

Tino scoffed lightheartedly and batted his hand. “Hardly, more like a nice dinner with some friends *and* Henrik.”

Tolys reached his hands up and took Hana from his arms, petting her gently as he turned his head to look up at him from the couch. “That sounds like fun.”

Tino patted Hana’s little head as she wiggled and yipped in his friend’s lap, obviously very happy to be with him. “Yeah.”

“You’re going to be spending the holidays with them too right?” Eduard asked.

“Mhmm,” he hummed, “don’t worry though—I’ll probably be back the day of.”

Eduard batted his hand and dismissed it, pushing up his glasses on his face. “Nah, don’t worry about it. We have Feliks to replace you.” He snickered.

Tolys pushed his shoulder, scoffing, while Feliks shrunk even closer to him—seeming to be embarrassed that his name was even mentioned in front of someone he didn’t know well. “Don’t say

that,” he scolded.

Tino laughed too, pushing on Eduard’s shoulder and holding his hand over his lips to contain his laughter. “Yeah? Well, you guys have had enough of me this season—it’s only fair that I spend some time with a couple other friends!”

“More like *just* your *boyfriend*,” Eduard teased again.

An embarrassed flush formed over Tino’s face, “Stop it!”

“Okay, enough!” Tolys scolded Eduard for a second time, this time a bit less playfully.

Eduard didn’t stop laughing.

Tino was saved from having to interact with them further when his boyfriend descended the stairs. He had a small gift in his hands and promptly pushed it under the Christmas tree. He had a cute little blush on his face—though Tino couldn’t really be sure why.

“Was that the last of the presents you had to wrap, Ricky?” Tolys asked.

Tino immediately turned his head to face his friend, taking a step back in shock. Had Tolys called him that? Since when? That was Mathias’ nickname! His boyfriend’s blush grew a bit deeper, and a recognizable smile overtook his face.

“*Ricky*?!” Eduard repeated, sitting up in his seat. “*Please* can I call you that too? That’s hilarious!”

Henrik looked a bit shocked that he was being asked that question, like he was completely unprepared for it. “Um—if you want.” He joined Tino at his side and squeezed his hands a few times as he took it.

“Yes!” Eduard exclaimed. It really was surprising—crazy even, that his friends were now *wanting* to call Henrik by a nickname. He knew they liked him but...this much? It was hard to even believe that they were the same people—who at the beginning of it all had actively been so afraid of him. Eduard who’d called him ‘terrifying’ and ‘scary’, Tolys who had, not vocally voiced his disapproval, but still implied it through his actions. And Raivis who had...honestly gotten along well with him from the start. It was nice that they were all becoming so close.

“Well, you two have fun,” Tolys said as the two of them began to head towards the front of the house.

“Thanks!” Tino cheered. Henrik leaned in on him and the two of them walked out the door to the car.

His boyfriend looked so *happy*. His eyes were sparkling brightly behind his silver framed glasses, and a light little smile traced his face. He squeezed his hand and Henrik squeezed it in return, fondly looking over at him and kissing the top of his head.

When they slid into the car together, Tino decided to play Henrik’s favorite music—just because he liked seeing him so happy. He seemed to enjoy that a lot, and he took one of his hands off the wheel to affectionately rub Tino’s leg in appreciation. Henrik was incredibly simple. He cared most about the small things in life, like hand holding and sweet kisses. He’d much rather appreciate a quiet night alone by the fire with him to some grand romantic gesture. He liked it when Tino would just sit with him, neither saying anything as they did nothing in particular, solely enjoying the feeling of leaning against each other. Henrik liked waking up early and drinking sweet coffee, and he especially appreciated when Tino would get up before him and make some for him. But the thing he loved most of all is when Henrik would just sit and listen. It could be about pointless and trivial things, or it could

be about his hobbies or his interests—it didn't really matter too much. He never said a lot, but just from looking at his face it was obvious just how much he liked to hear him go on and on until his jaw grew tired of speaking so many words. And when Henrik would occasionally interject to talk about his own hobbies, it was something that made Tino's heart go soft in the best way. He just loved him a lot.

Tino turned to look over at him and was enamored by what he saw. A face that, to others, would've looked quite cold—but to Tino radiated warmth and happiness. His lips were slightly upturned, and though his eyes were sharp, the way that they twinkled showed the amount of joy that he was truly feeling. He put his hand over his boyfriend's and leaned against the door of the car, watching him drive.

The next song began to blare out of the speakers—which, truly, Tino had forgotten that he'd even turned on, and he began to absentmindedly sing to it. Since getting himself involved with Henrik, he'd practically memorized all of ABBA's music.

"My, my, at Waterloo, Napoleon did surrender!"

Henrik brightened further, and Tino decided to sing a little louder, just for him.

"And I have met my destiny in quite a similar way!" He sat up a bit. "The history book on the shelf; is always repeating itself!"

"...Waterloo, I was defeated, you won the war..." came Henrik's voice, quietly singing the words in a deep and rich sounding bass that Tino nearly lost his composure. His voice was wonderful, it was like delicious chocolate. It was thick and dense and was just so captivating that Tino couldn't help but stare at him—so much so that Henrik glanced at him shyly as Tino was nearly late for the next line.

"Waterloo, promise to love you *forevermore*!" He didn't care how sappy it was, he just needed to express to him just how much he cared for him.

...How much that he *wanted* to be with him.

"...Waterloo, couldn't escape if I wanted to,"

"Waterloo! Knowing my fate is to be with you!"

They sang the chorus together, and because Tino's voice was one of a higher Tenor—they meshed perfectly together, harmonizing in perfect sync. They sang like that until the song was almost at its closing.

"...Finally facing my Waterloo..." Henrik sang, now much louder and more confidently than before.

"Ooh-ooh, Waterloo!" Tino returned.

They finished the last line together, and Henrik gently pushed the car into park (Truthfully, Tino had been too engrossed in the song to even notice they'd arrived).

"Knowing my fate is to be with you!" They sang in unison.

Tino couldn't stand it anymore, he leapt out of the car and ran to the other side, while Henrik met him there with an awkward little shuffle. He threw his arms around him, aggressively showering him in little kisses until his breath was short and he couldn't contain it anymore.

Because finally, Henrik had decided to sing for him.

“Your voice is amazing!” Tino cheered.

Henrik blushed hotly, moving his hands to sit at Tino’s waist as they held each other close.

“...You think so?”

“Yes!”

Henrik squeezed him tightly. “Was too embarrassed before but...” he buried his head in Tino’s shoulder as he mumbled his next words. “Love you too much not to, hjärtanskär.” At that little admission, Tino couldn’t help but pull his head up so he could kiss him, their lips meeting in passionate heat. Tino’s confidence mixed with Henrik’s gentle shyness culminating in a moment so amazingly warm that neither wanted to leave.

Well...that was until they heard the clearing of a throat to their right. They immediately broke apart to see Emil, an unreadable expression on his face as he stared up at the two of them. Henrik looked more than a bit mortified, and he turned his head away. Perhaps the sight of being caught engaging in such a kiss in front of the kid who looked up to him would be...a lot for him. Tino blushed too—but not nearly as much.

“Hey,” Tino greeted. He felt a bit awkward and he felt his hand instinctively going to clutch at the cross around his neck.

“...Hey,” Emil greeted back. Mathias and Lukas soon joined him, with Mathias putting both his hands on Emil’s shoulders and squeezing them lightly.

“Hey! It looks like we made it here at the same time!” he said cheerfully.

Tino and Henrik muttered in vague agreement, as they intertwined their hands. The five of them continued to walk into the restaurant, opening the doors and moving to stand behind the podium.

Unlike last time, Yong Soo was standing at his post and smiled brightly when he saw them. “Couldn’t stay away huh?” he said to Tino and Henrik as he leaned against the podium. He pulled out a couple of menus and gestured with his hands for them to follow him through the restaurant. They did so.

“Nope!” Tino said cheerfully. The five of them were led to a circular table near the middle of the restaurant’s floor. Tino sat down between Henrik and Mathias—who was sitting next to Lukas and directly across from Emil. After seating them, Yong Soo disappeared, probably not to return for a short while. For some reason, Henrik looked like he wanted to say something to him.

Emil, Lukas, and Mathias were taking their time admiring the walls of the restaurant, looking intently at the beautiful dragon paintings. Tino certainly couldn’t blame him...they were stunning...

“So,” Tino began, leaning one elbow on the table. His other arm hung by his side so he and Henrik could hold hands underneath it. “What made you guys decide on this place?”

Mathias shrugged his shoulders and reached across the table, patting Emil’s hand before it was snatched away by the teenager. “Em-y wouldn’t tell us,” he snickered.

Emil blushed hotly and wore a heavy frown, turning away. “Stop,” he said harshly, “I just like asian food, *okay?*”

“Hm,” Lukas hummed with a teasing little smile. He reached over and ruffled with his little brother’s hair, which made the poor boy turn even pinker. He quickly knocked his hand away and crossed his arms, picking up his chair and moving to sit closer to Henrik, who was sitting next to him at his right. At that, his boyfriend huffed a little laugh and affectionately wrapped an arm around Emil’s shoulder—this time, the boy didn’t reject the physical affection and remained there. Emil probably saw Henrik as some kind of uncle or an older brother, which made Tino wonder how he himself was seen by him.

Mathias snorted at the interaction, “You don’t like me, but you like him huh?”

“*He is* more mature than you are,” Emil sneered. That only made Mathias laugh more, and a light blush dappled onto Henrik’s face. Lukas looked at him too, smirking a wry little smile.

“Of course,” Lukas agreed slyly, “He’s *always* been the most *mature*.” Mathias burst out laughing again, while Lukas let out a quiet snicker from behind his hand. Henrik’s blush grew deeper and he removed his arm, looking to the floor. Emil puffed out his cheek, but didn’t argue further.

If it was highschool, Henrik probably would’ve covered up his embarrassment by beating Mathias to the ground. Thankfully, it wasn’t like that anymore. They were too old for that kind of thing—and something told Tino that his current state of such contentment would prevent him from ever even *thinking* about taking such an action.

Obviously, Tino also had no idea what it was that they were all laughing about, but he supposed that came with being the new man to the group. Maybe one day he’d understand, but for now he’d just have to deal with feeling a bit left out.

After Mathias and Lukas teased Henrik and Emil for a while, they all picked up their menus to decide on something to order.

“Luke-y! Do you wanna share a plate of the chow mein with me?” Mathias asked excitedly, bouncing in his seat a little and shoving his menu in front of Lukas’.

“Fine,” he replied, rolling his eyes.

Tino and Henrik gave each other a small little glance. He was asking if Tino wanted to do the same thing.

...He supposed he wouldn’t mind.

He nodded his head in agreement, and Henrik pointed to the menu, asking if he’d like the chicken fried rice. He nodded once more, and Henrik smiled lightly, putting the menu back down and leaning back in his chair.

When Yong Soo came back and took their orders, he had a large and bright grin that could probably light up the whole room. His teeth were a shining white and it was honestly a wonder that they didn’t sparkle at all. He took down their orders quickly. His charming disposition faltered slightly while Mathias tried to explain that he wanted two orders of Chow Mein but on one big plate, but he recovered smoothly.

“And what about you, kid?” Yong Soo asked Emil, leaning over the table slightly to hear him in case he was quiet.

Emil crossed his arms, and looked to the side. “...I’ll have the chicken fried rice too—I guess.” Strangely, Emil had gotten exactly what he and Henrik were getting.

“Coming right up!” Yong Soo said happily. He gave them a two-fingered salute and disappeared into the back of the restaurant. It seemed that he was in a lot less of a rush this time.

“So, Tino, Buddy!” Mathias’ happy call came from across the table, “You’re coming to celebrate Christmas with us right?” He leaned across the table and laid his hands out, reaching for him but falling a bit short.

Tino nodded. “Mhmm,” he hummed, “wouldn’t miss it.” He felt a bit guilty, because *yes*, these people were his friends...he still felt like he was intruding a little bit. These people had all been friends for years...and as much as they (especially Mathias) tried to make him feel welcome, he supposed that true integration would only come with time.

Henrik, perhaps being able to sense his slight discomfort, squeezed his hand a bit, which was an action that Tino returned.

“Have you done your Christmas shopping already? Luke-y, Em-y, and I went out yesterday!”

Emil physically cringed at that, recoiling in embarrassment. “Don’t tell them about that!”

Lukas flashed a teasing little smile. “Why not?”

“Yeah!” Mathias agreed, “Are you embarrassed about sitting with *Santa* and telling him what you wanted for Christmas?”

“I only did that because you forced me!” Emil exclaimed. “Santa isn’t real!”

“He is,” Henrik said.

Mathias, Lukas, and Emil all turned to look at him, as he wore an incredibly serious expression on his face.

Emil scoffed and slumped back in his chair. “I take it back, none of you are mature.”

“Okay, okay, maybe not us, but what about Tino?” Mathias suggested, smiling brightly and patting the table in his general direction. “He can be the mature one can’t he?”

Him? The mature one? Tino himself thought that was laughable, as he turned to the side chuckling into his hand. He felt Henrik laughing a bit too. If Emil reacted, he couldn’t really tell, but when he was finally able to open his eyes again, he saw that the boy had a light pink blush on his face as he looked over at him. When he saw that Tino noticed, he cleared his throat and turned his head away.

“Don’t think that’s right,” Henrik finally said, referring to Mathias’ statement. “Not him.”

“Then...I suppose there isn’t one,” Lukas hummed, a wry little smirk on his face.

“Em-y could be!” Mathias laughed.

“The high schooler? The sixteen-year-old?” Lukas replied back, that smirk breaking into a rare, genuine smile, “The most mature of all of us?” The entire table erupted into laughter, and poor Emil looked so completely embarrassed that he was a dark scarlet.

“Okay, okay, enough,” Tino said, gesturing with his hands for them all to stop. “We don’t need to make fun of him like that.” Emil gave him an appreciative look as the others let out a low murmur of agreement.

“Hello again!” greeted Yong Soo as he once again arrived at their table. “Two chicken fried rice and one chow mein right?” The five of them nodded, and the dishes were placed down on the table. This time, Tino noted, he placed all of their orders in the right spot. “Let me know if you need anything else!” Henrik opened his mouth to say something, but then promptly closed it as Yong Soo walked away.

“Did you want to say something to him?” Tino asked, squeezing his boyfriend’s hand.

Henrik shook his head. “No, it was nothin’, hjärtanskär.” He squeezed it back. Mathias looked incredibly, suspiciously happy at the exchange, though Tino couldn’t be sure why. Lukas looked rather aloof, and Emil had a very forced smile on his face.

Tino honestly thought that dinner was going really well. Mathias soon got to telling stories of those old days when he, Henrik, and Lukas were all in high school together—much to the distaste and embarrassment of the other two. Of course their disdain only made those tales much more interesting to listen to.

“—It was Luke-y and I’s favorite song! So we both sang it together—”

“We did *not*,” Lukas interrupted harshly.

“Did too!” Mathias argued, “We were unstoppable! Because I got the low notes and you got the high ones! And we danced together and—”

“Stop.” Lukas interjected again, blushing slightly. “No one wants to hear about that.”

“Okay, *fine*,” Mathias said, laughing. “Tino, you got any stories from high school you’d like to share?”

He bit the inside of his lip. His high school days...weren’t exactly days he liked to remember. Sure, there were the happy times—like when his dad had dropped him off for the first day in his fire truck, and when his grandfather surprised him by picking him up one day, and telling all of his classmates stories from the Winter War...but those days were vastly overshadowed by what happened later. After the passing of his father it honestly became a blur. Blinding colorful lights made brighter by alcohol, the touches of strangers and the disgusting feeling that came afterwards, hours of studying and forcing himself to do well in school to prove to everyone else that he was okay. And the sweet release of a cigarette that would make all his pain disappear.

He hardly noticed his breath quickening and his heart beginning to pound against his chest. He raised a hand to his mouth and bent over slightly, breathing through his fingers as he longed to feel that sweet, sickening, tobacco flow down his throat and fill his lungs.

They were just out in the car.

He could go get one.

The beating of his heart grew faster, and he immediately felt Henrik’s hand squeezing his. His vision blurred slightly as he felt a pull on his back as his boyfriend urged him to his feet and away from the table—away from the confused stares of their friends. He brought him outside the restaurant and into the darkness of the parking lot, gently caressing his hand until they were sitting at the curb. His boyfriend rubbed his back.

“You okay?”

Tino ran a hand through his hair then clutched the cross around his neck, looking at the car but making no move to go towards it. He didn't *want* to smoke again. He wanted to be clean—to leave that part of his life behind.

...But it seemed that no matter how hard he tried, he was unable to escape it.

His breaths grew quicker.

He didn't want that.

He knotted his fingers together in his lap.

He *needed* to be clean.

His head felt light.

He had to be, for the sake of any future family that he was going to have.

His skin felt like it was ice.

"Tino," Henrik called gently again, comfortingly rubbing his leg and pulling him closer. "Take a deep breath." He mimicked the action—which Tino immediately repeated.

A small feeling of calm washed over him it wasn't much but...

"Again," Henrik said.

They repeated the action until his breath was steady.

"Look up," Henrik said, pointing up at the stars shining above them. "Count them."

He didn't hesitate to comply.

"One, two, three, four, five..." he counted, saying numbers aloud as Henrik gently looked on, not bothering to point out that he occasionally counted the same star twice, or if he skipped a number, or couldn't remember the English word for it at all as he'd forego trying to remember and just say the word in Finnish.

By the time he was done, his breaths were once again steady, and he no longer felt the intense pounding in his chest.

"...All good?" Henrik asked, concern coating his voice.

"Yes," Tino answered. "Sorry."

"Nothin' to be sorry for," Henrik said. "Just glad you're okay."

He wanted to apologize again but he held his tongue.

Henrik leaned forward and kissed his forehead, his lips gently pressing onto his skin in reassurance. "...Recovery is a process," he reminded him.

Tino moved closer to him, pushing himself against his warm body. "...I know," he mumbled. The two of them sat in silence for a moment, watching as a little red car rolled into the back of the lot. Its headlights shone brightly on them.

“What is it with me and this damn parking lot?” Tino asked, shaking his head in annoyance.

Henrik said nothing, only comfortingly kissing his head and holding him close.

After a while, Tino moved to get up. Henrik followed him.

“Ready to go back in?” he asked.

“Yeah,” Tino agreed.

They walked over to the doors of the restaurant, but before they pushed them open Tino stopped, pulling on Henrik’s hand lightly so he turned around.

“Thanks for helping me,” he said.

“You’re welcome,” Henrik mumbled. “I care about you...Wanna make sure you’re safe.”

“Thanks,” Tino said again. Their eyes met, exchanging those words the two of them knew all too well.

I love you. I love you. I love you.

They pushed open the doors of the restaurant, and began walking back to their table. Lukas was clearly whispering extremely harsh things to Mathias, and Tino could only assume that he was speaking that combination of Danish-Norwegian as he would’ve wanted to keep the matter private. Mathias looked extremely guilty over the whole thing, scratching his head and nodding along with whatever Lukas was saying. Emil on the other hand was leaning back on his chair and texting on his phone. His eyes were glued to it, in an expression that displayed either extreme aloofness or slight annoyance.

When Henrik and Tino sat back down in their chairs, Mathias immediately leaned forward, putting his hands on the table as he spoke. “I’m really sorry, Tino, I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“It’s okay, Mathias,” Tino said. His eyes softened in his sincerity. He didn’t want to make his friend feel bad. He hadn’t meant to hurt him. “It’s really not your fault. I don’t blame you at all, please don’t feel bad.” Honestly, it was a bit ridiculous that he got that worked up about such a simple thing, but he supposed that it wasn’t helped by his withdrawal symptoms.

“As long as you’re alright,” Lukas said. His expression wasn’t one of his usual harshness, this time it was much softer as the concern from his voice leaked onto his face.

Emil looked like he wasn’t sure what to say, but nodded at him in some kind of action of solidarity.

From there, dinner went well, the tension from before being easily forgotten as they lost themselves to stupid jokes and Mathias’ surprisingly well thought out dissections of any movies he’d seen recently. He really knew what he was talking about, and it was interesting to Tino that he had so many intelligent things to say.

Eventually, Yong Soo came by and collected their finished plates, and left the bill—which Mathias insisted on paying for. It was really sweet of him to do something like that.

“Well, I think we better call it a night,” Mathias said with a little clap of his hands. “We gotta get Em- y here home so he can get to bed on time. We wouldn’t want him getting on *Santa’s naughty list*.”

“Stop that! I’m not a little kid!” Emil growled.

The table erupted in laughter, but it was quickly silenced by the sound of the restaurant door jingling. They all turned to see who had entered, and Tino inhaled a sharp gasp of surprise at the two men who were standing there.

The first man was incredibly tall—matching Henrik’s height. He had a large set of shoulders and piercing lilac eyes that peaked through platinum blond hair. He had a large and rounded nose, and the scarf he was wearing was pure white. It was so long that it almost trailed onto the floor behind him. The other was short, with brown hair that was tied up in a high ponytail. His eyes were golden brown, and wore a prideful expression. It was Ivan Braginsky, standing with the owner of the restaurant, Yao Wang. They’d entered together. Tino’s eyes remained on them as they walked the floor together and sat down at a table. Ivan didn’t exactly look to be happy—but it wasn’t like he was extremely sad either. His gaze was downcast but his posture was straight.

“Wait...” Lukas murmured, “Is that who I think it is...?”

“It is!” Mathias exclaimed, “Good ‘ol Braginsky!”

Tino nearly choked. ‘*Good ‘ol Braginsky*’? Henrik had said he had *known* him...surely he was something more than that if *that* was how Mathias was referring to him.

He glanced over to his boyfriend, who wore an unreadable expression on his face.

“Hey!” Mathias exclaimed loudly—projecting his voice across the restaurant, “Braginsky!”

The man in question turned to look over, and smiled warmly when he saw Mathias—standing up he began to walk over with Yao following behind him.

Tino’s blood ran cold.

He was coming closer.

Tino bit on his lip, his eyes blazing but his heart unsure of what to feel.

He was a man who had undoubtedly hurt Tolys...but he had forgiven him...He was a man who many people were afraid of...but Henrik was like that too—so Tino should know better than to judge someone based off of something like that. Ivan was a cruel and careless man...but he, according to Kiku, hadn’t been able to take care of his dog and had given her up. He was someone he’d hated for as long as he’d lived in America...but he was also someone who Mathias referred to as ‘Good ‘ol Braginsky’. Did he deserve a second chance...? Tino didn’t get the opportunity to decide, as Ivan arrived, towering over their table and looking down on them with a light smile on his face.

“Привет,” he greeted looking over the table. For just a moment, his eyes met with Tino, two pairs of lilac connecting with each other. Ivan immediately averted his gaze.



“Hey ‘ol buddy! Nice to see you again!” Mathias said with a smile.

“Nice to see you too,” he returned. He gave a subdued little wave to Emil, who waved back at him. “Any better at Chemistry?” he asked with a playful smile.

“Have you gotten any better at teaching it?” he teased, eyes of stark violet softening with rare affection.

“If I recall, you *did* pass that year...” He put a hand to his lips, covering a small laugh. He took a step back. “I would like you to meet Yao,” he said, patting his back. “He is my...friend.” His face brightened at the use of the word, like it was something that he hadn’t been able to say for a long time. Yao did a small greeting wave, as Ivan continued to talk. “Yao, this is my old chemistry student and his family.”

“Nice to meet you,” Yao said.

Ivan was so...*normal*. He was shy and a bit nervous, but he just seemed like he was extremely mundane. He wasn’t like he remembered him at all.

“Well, we don’t want to hold you up,” Ivan said. “Enjoy the rest of your evening!” He and Yao turned and left, going back to their table and sitting down.

“Man, I *love* that guy,” Mathias snickered watching him go. “He’s a real riot.” The five of them stood up, adjusting jackets and coats before they’d have to go into the cold of the outside.

Ivan wasn’t at all like he remembered him to be, with cruel smiles and cold eyes. He was a bit shy—playful even...Perhaps he let his roommate’s view of the man affect him too much.

He could feel Henrik’s gaze on him as they exited the restaurant, waving goodbye to each other and saying that they’d see each other again on Christmas Eve. Tino was silent until he slid into the passenger seat of the car, his eyebrows knitted together in contemplation. His boyfriend glanced at him again before pulling the car into drive and taking it out of the lot.

“...You know,” Tino said, “maybe he isn’t as bad as I thought.”

The rest of the car ride was silent. Because of the time of night there weren’t many cars out, and so the two of them were able to arrive home much faster than either anticipated. When they got to the front door of their house, Tolys was there to greet them, handing Henrik their dog before going back upstairs—presumably to be with Feliks.

Hana was growing to be a bit heavier, and she looked like she had gained weight, which was alright by Tino’s book. She had been so skinny before, so he was happy that she was looking healthy again.

“Aw, look at you, sweet girl,” Tino cooed, scratching her behind the ear. She panted and licked his outstretched hand, settling into Henrik’s arms. His boyfriend looked to be very tired—his eyes blinking shut and staying there every now and then. “Ready for bed?” he asked.

Henrik nodded.

They walked down the hallway and into the living room where the staircase was located. Eduard was sitting alone on the couch, and when he saw them he gave a little wave of acknowledgement. He was playing some game on a laptop, though Tino had no idea what it was. They were about to step up the stairs when he suddenly felt a ringing in his pocket.

Shit.

He sighed and pulled out his phone, already knowing that it was a call from his mother. “You go upstairs, kulta, I’ll be back in a minute.”

His boyfriend nodded and kissed the top of his head. “Alright, hjärtanskär.” He lumbered up the steps and disappeared into their room.

“Moi,” Tino said into the phone.

It wasn’t that he *didn’t* want to talk to his mother...it was just that he’d *much* rather be up in his room, cuddling in bed with his boyfriend and their dog.

“Tino,” His mother greeted in Finnish, in a tone that was *very* enthusiastic for her. “*How are you?*”

“I’ve been well,” Tino yawned, “I just got home from having dinner with some friends.” His own use of his mother tongue was a bit sloppy, but it was only because he *desperately* wanted her to take the hint that he wasn’t interested in talking right now.

“Some friends?” She asked in a playful manner, *“Were any of them girls?”*

“No!” Tino exclaimed, “It was just me and four other guys.”

“Do any of them have girlfriends?” She continued to pry.

“No,” Tino said again. That wasn’t a lie, but something told Tino that she wouldn’t react too positively to hearing that two of his *male* friends were in a relationship. Not to even mention that one of the others was his own boyfriend.

“Son, you need to get yourself together! You need to find a sweet girl and bring her home. I want to have grandchildren one day, and it’s selfish of you to keep that from me!” She was laughing. Obviously, this was all a joke to her. A joke that Tino didn’t find very amusing. He bit his tongue. He hated when she acted like this even if it was a joke; When she’d try to guilt him into agreeing with her, when she’d try to make him feel like he was being a bad person because he wasn’t following exactly what *she* wanted his life to be like.

“I’d like to have children someday,” Tino said into the phone, “Maybe I’ll end up adopting some, there are so many kids without loving parents...I’d love to be able to provide for a few...”

“And leave them without a mother?” she said dramatically over the phone. *“Don’t be silly, Nassikka, Children need two parents, a mother and a father. Otherwise they’ll come out wrong. I mean, look at you!”* She laughed in obvious teasing.

Tino inhaled sharply. Of course she didn’t know the extent to which that comment would hurt him. She didn’t know about all those parties he went to. She didn’t know how much pain he had actually been in after his death. He’d been fine—at least in front of her. She didn’t know he smoked. And with the way this conversation was leading...perhaps she never would. Because she had no idea what had happened back then. She had no idea that those days were *nothing* to joke about.

“I have to go, it’s late. Goodbye.”

“Tino? Wait!”

He hung up the phone without a second thought.

Eduard turned to him, giving him a sympathetic look, clearly not understanding the entire conversation, but knowing enough to realize how badly it had gone. “Yikes,” he said.

“...Yeah,” Tino sighed.

Eduard closed his computer and stood up, going around the side of the couch and wrapping his friend in the hug he could tell he needed. They didn’t say anything, Tino only holding his friend tightly. His presence was so comforting, and he smelled like expensive cologne and the gentleness of autumn, like light dew drops on freshly fallen leaves.

“God, what am I going to do...” Tino groaned. “I can’t *not* tell them forever...”

“It’ll be alright,” Eduard said soothingly, rubbing his back. “You’ll tell them when you’re ready.”

He squeezed him tightly once more and then let go, wanting to say more but unsure of how to vocalize it. Tino felt Eduard’s teal eyes on him as he slunk up the stairs, obviously concerned as he watched him go. Perhaps he could’ve said something more to him, but it seemed that they were both unsure of what words to use, English, Finnish, or Estonian. He slipped into his room, not even

bothering to change out of his clothes, gently pulling his father's jacket off his frame and placing it onto his desk before throwing his jeans off. With a tired sigh he collapsed into bed, next to his already sleeping boyfriend, and the dog that was curled up on his chest.

Tino turned on his side, looking over them. He didn't want the life that his mother had outlined for him. For him to go out and find some girl, to get married quickly and to have kids with her, to come back to Finland. Well, he did want all those things, but he'd want to do them with Henrik.

This life that he had now was just...wonderful for him. He had many friends, and a boyfriend who loved him more than anything. Hell, they had adopted a dog together. He wouldn't leave it just because his mother didn't approve. But telling her that would be the hard part, wouldn't it? Because damn it all, he didn't care what she thought. He and Henrik would be great parents one day. They'd have a happy future together, when they'd graduate and get their dream jobs, when they'd move out of this house and build their own, when they'd settled down and get married.

Tino sighed and looked over to face the man he loved. He would've reached his hand over to cup his cheek, but didn't because he knew it would wake him. He looked so gentle when he was sleeping; so serene with deep and steady breaths. Maybe he was being a bit forward but he really wanted to marry him. And if that meant he'd have to do that without his family's approval then so be it.

...Even if that was easier to say in his head than to actually say out loud.

He turned to his other side, facing the wall of his room and looking at all the family pictures that were strewn about the space..

Tino sighed again and closed his eyes, curling up in his sleep and wrapping his arms around his chest. If everything went okay, he wouldn't even have to worry about these things. Hopefully, it would all be alright.

Chapter 20

Chapter Notes



Henrik watched Tino stare down at the puzzle on the coffee table. His boyfriend wasn't the most patient when it came to things like this. He liked to do things quickly, so he had a lot of trouble with doing an activity that was mostly trial and error.

"And this goes here—argh, no it doesn't!" He threw two pieces back down at the table. Henrik smiled, watching him run a frustrated hand through his hair. He was incredibly cute when he was annoyed like that.

"Like this," Henrik said, taking two pieces and connecting them effortlessly. "Follow the lines on the piece."

Tino rolled his eyes, as he had heard that advice at least 14 times that night. He didn't mean it maliciously of course, so Henrik took no offense to it, laughing again when Tino tried to connect a few more pieces. Of every fifty matches Tino tried to make, he probably only got one or two right. Still though, his eyes remained so narrowed that they were almost shut, and his tongue poked slightly out from his mouth. He was so deep in concentration, trying his best to solve this puzzle and get it over with.

This *particular* puzzle they were solving was of a picture of a forest, with lots of deep browns and lush greens. It was rather difficult, though Henrik had solved it himself a couple of times. It was one of his favorites. Right now though, it was only about 20% complete.

The light jingling of a collar was heard and Henrik turned around to see Hana descending the stairs. She rounded the couch and jumped up onto it, moving to lay in Henrik's lap.

"Hm," he hummed affectionately, sitting back in his seat and scratching her behind the ears. She wiggled in his arms appreciatively.

Tino took his eyes away from the puzzle to glance at them. He sighed and leaned on Henrik's shoulder. "She sure likes you now." He reached his hand down and started petting her too.

"Mm," Henrik said. Hana seemed to *love* the attention she was getting, moving this way and that as their hands ran through her fur. "Likes you more though," Henrik mumbled as the dog moved to sit in Tino's lap.

"I can think of a particular reason for that." Tino replied.

"Mm, right," Henrik said.

Tino sighed and looked down at the puzzle. "...How long did it take to complete this one before?"

Henrik shrugged, "Can't remember."

"God," Tino groaned.

Henrik let out a little puff of air, laughing at his boyfriend as he stared helplessly down at the puzzle.

"Need some help?" came a voice from the stairs. Henrik turned and saw Eduard flipping his sparkly hair, with Raivis following behind him. They were wearing simple clothes, ones more accustomed to sleep than they were usually seen in. Eduard was wearing light blue pajama pants with little lightbulbs printed on them and a white undershirt, while Raivis was dressed in a matching set of red silk. At their appearance, Hana readjusted in Tino's lap.

"Please," Tino mumbled, "I'm desperate."

When they rounded the couch to sit on the other side of the coffee table, Tino let out a little snicker, because as soon as they approached Hana leapt away from them and ran back upstairs.

“It’s a bit early in the evening to be going out like that, don’t you think?”

Eduard scoffed and batted his hand. “Do you want help or not?” he said, beginning to match the pieces together.

“...Tolys is taking us to the drive-in...” Raivis mumbled, looking up from the table. “...They’re showing some old musicals...”

“Mm,” Henrik grunted. “Sounds fun.”

“I know!” Eduard exclaimed enthusiastically, “You only have to pay per car and they’re playing movies until like—4 in the morning! It’ll be great!” He matched a couple of pieces, but found himself unable to attach it to the main part of the puzzle.

Raivis peaked shyly through his hair, peering through dirty-blond locks as he met Henrik’s eyes. His stare wasn’t intense or unnerving...rather it was...his own little way of communicating friendliness. He wasn’t too hard to understand after all.

A sudden blaring noise of a ringing cell phone interrupted the moment, and Tino sighed. “Be right back,” he mumbled, standing and reaching into his pocket. He left the room and walked into the kitchen. Henrik, Raivis, and Eduard all exchanged a look, obviously all knowing who was calling and why.

“Poor guy,” Eduard sighed, “his family is just *relentless*.”

Raivis and Henrik said nothing, looking over to the kitchen where they knew he was, speaking Finnish into the phone. He sounded angry, but then again, that was probably just because of how his native tongue sounded. Tino probably wanted to tell them, to share how happy he was feeling and how life was going, but he couldn’t. He was afraid that they wouldn’t accept him. There had been a reason he’d only told his father. Because it was clear as day that he loved that man as much as a boy could. Tino probably told him *everything*. Well, at least until he died.

The light creaking of the stairs could be heard, and the three of them turned their heads to see Tolys and Feliks at the top of the stairs. They too were dressed in pajamas, but oddly enough, they were wearing matching onesies, with Tolys being dressed like a knight and Feliks wearing one that resembled a great pink dragon. As soon as he saw Henrik, Feliks straightened in his posture, though didn’t move to stand behind Tolys like he usually did.

“Is everything okay?” Tolys asked, stepping down and joining them at the couch.

“Yeah, just Tino’s family again,” Eduard said, glancing in his general direction. Tino yelled loudly in the other room and Henrik stood, wanting to go over to help him but ultimately deciding that he should let him deal with the situation on his own. Eduard too reacted, flinching slightly.

“What?” Tolys asked, “Did he say something?”

“Something about...” he paused, as if he was trying his best to translate between two languages that didn’t quite mesh all the way. “Something about not answering his phone anymore...I think?”

Tolys looked over, verdant green eyes staring blankly at the wall. “Oh,” he said sadly. The other four turned to look too, doubtlessly wondering if there was anything they could do to ease the situation and

help their friend.

It was silent for a moment, before Tino's voice thundered from the other side of the wall. The five of them heard the phone click, and turned away attempting to look busy as Tino rounded the corner and came into the living room. He was muttering something under his breath, but Henrik couldn't decipher it. Tino grumpily sat down, leaning against the couch with his arms crossed. He sat next to Henrik.

"Uh, everything okay?" Eduard asked, awkwardly clasping his hands together.

"Yeah, it's fine," Tino replied. His demeanor was somewhat cold. Henrik put his arm around his shoulder.

There was silence for all too long, and the others probably realized that they weren't going to get much out of him. Maybe Eduard would later, but not now.

"Okay, well, we better get going," Tolys said, probably wanting to leave as soon as possible. Eduard, Raivis, and Feliks nodded in agreement, quickly shuffling to the door.

"Have fun," Henrik mumbled as they left.

"We will!" Eduard said back.

The door shut with a quick slam, and Tino and Henrik were alone, standing together in the living room.

"Let's go upstairs," Tino said.

"...Mm."

His boyfriend dragged him by the hand, marching up the stairs as they went to their room, slamming it closed and collapsing onto his bed with an annoyed and resigned sigh.

"...Everythin' okay?" Henrik asked, immediately sitting by his side.

"Yeah," he said, "it's just family stuff. The same as always." He sighed, shaking his head and running a hand through his hair. "My mom just tries her best to make me feel like a bad person sometimes..."

Tino? A bad person? It was a ridiculous sentiment. He was truly one of the most wonderful people he knew. He was so kind, and sweet, but was unafraid to get his hands dirty and stand his ground. He was strong, and confident while also remaining someone who could be so open about the way he was feeling. He didn't care about what other people thought, something that Henrik admired him a lot for. Tino was more than his appearance might lead one to believe. Cool lilac eyes that burned in fire-y passion, a muscular and chiseled physique hidden behind loose and baggy clothing. Someone who—while others may assume to be quite meek—was actually a loud and boisterous metalhead, who owned a motorcycle and was probably the worst driver he'd ever met. He was the firefighter who had saved his life, and had left him with a beautiful reminder of that fact. Henrik loved him. Tino ruled his heart like no one else had ever been able to do, captivating him by doing nothing but opening his arms and inviting him into his life. He was everything.

"She's wrong."

Tino smiled at him a little, a puff of laughter escaping his lips before it fell back into a thin line.

“...Can’t blame you for not tellin’ them,” Henrik mumbled.

“Why do you say that?” Tino asked. He moved closer, laying his head in Henrik’s lap.

“...Never told my family.”

He had promptly stopped speaking to them after graduating high school, moving in with Mathais in their shared apartment as soon as he was able. In hindsight, they really didn’t deserve that. He had been bitter about moving. He hadn’t wanted to leave the Swedish countryside, where they had been alone and secluded from civilization. It was his favorite place in the whole world, with beautiful shining stars and long tall grass. They had been away from everything out there. And growing up in a place like that left him with no idea that he would be so feared by others.

Being forced to move to America was a culture shock in more ways than one. Long gone was the sweet smelling fresh air of the Swedish country-side with a large house and miles of open land. Now it was replaced by a Californian public school, where students and teachers alike would recoil from his presence. That was a wound that never healed. There was nothing that he could do about it. He was much too shy to approach anyone, not helped by years of isolation (save for the presence of his parents). And, what could he even say to them, it’s not like he spoke the language. During that period, a part of him knew that it wasn’t his parents fault but the resentment only grew as time went on.

When he met Mathias, it was like a breath of fresh air laced with toxicity. He was mean sometimes, but he was nice too. They fought a lot, beating each other up until they were too black and blue to continue. But Mathias would also sit with him at lunch, trying his best to teach him English and treating him like he was an actual person instead of some scary monster. He was the only one who had ever given him a chance. But that changed in high school, when Mathias had met Lukas during their senior year. Suddenly, his only friend’s attention was having to be split between two people, not to mention the little brother he practically took in as his own.

That was a hard year to say the least.

The second he graduated he ran off with Mathias, who too had his own problems with his family. Henrik changed everything he could, from his bank account to his phone number, cutting his family off and leaving them behind. If Henrik could take it back, he would’ve. Because he was older now, and he recognized that none of it was their fault. He didn’t blame them for taking a well paying job, or trying to do what they thought was best for him. It wasn’t their fault that it didn’t work out.

He wanted to tell them that.

If only he knew how.

It had been too long, nearly four years without any contact, and he didn’t even know if he’d be able to face them after all this time. So really, how was he supposed to tell them that he was now in a relationship with a man. A man that had saved his life and with whom he had adopted a dog.

“You never told them at all?” Tino asked, causing Henrik to cease his reminiscing. “...How did that work out?”

“Not good,” Henrik said grimly.

Tino sighed and shook his head, more speaking to himself than to him. “God, what am I going to do?”

Henrik brushed a gentle hand through his hair. "...You don't have to decide now. It's late."

His boyfriend turned his head to the side and nodded softly. "...You're right." He shifted slightly on the bed, and Henrik moved to lay down next to him, wrapping his arms around his waist and hugging him close. Tino laughed and kissed his forehead, pressing Henrik's head into his chest as they settled down together. Tino slid off his father's jacket, tossing it over to the chair on his desk, and they both took off their jeans. Laying in bed without them was much more comfortable anyway.

"Sorry for being a," Tino paused, probably trying to remember the word, "A bummer." he snickered a little.

Henrik shook his head and held him close. "You're not," he said.

"You think?"

"Mm," Henrik hummed, "Like spending time with you."

"Ugh," Tino groaned, light teasing falling between his words. "You're so soft."

"Can't help it," Henrik replied, "Love you too much." He gave him a peck on the cheek.

"You really do," Tino said, small laughs escaping him as he received several more.

"Impossible for me to not."

Tino shook his head, smiling up at Henrik before leaning forward and pressing his lips to his forehead. "I love you." He whispered the words with such gentle sincerity, such quiet meaning that it made Henrik's heart flutter like it had the very first time he'd met him. He didn't hesitate to kiss him back, on his cheeks, and his chin, and the tip of his cute little nose until Tino was laughing and giggling from receiving so much attention.

"Love you too, hjärtanskär."

Pecks turned into deep kisses, passionate and loving as they lost themselves to each other. It was like everything else in the world was gone, everything but the feeling of Tino and his overwhelming presence. His skin was cold, but he burned like a fire that never went out, pure devotion that blazed from within. Henrik was so lost in it all, desperate in his desire for him and him alone. The two of them sat up, leaning against the bed frame as Henrik stared up at the man who meant so much to him. Henrik could hardly keep the words from spilling out of his mouth.

"Tino, can we have sex?" His face was flushed darkly in embarrassment, but he didn't look away. He'd never been the partner to actually start this kind of encounter. It had always thrust itself upon him. This was the first time that it was him making the first advance. He'd never really felt the desire to do something like that before. His first time, he had been used as nothing more than a tool—a rebound. Something to be used and discarded. It was probably the same for Tino. He was glad that together, they were able to be more than that.

Tino's eyes crinkled, softening as he smiled into another kiss and nodded gently.

When the two of them broke apart, his boyfriend turned and faced the walls, looking at all those pictures around his room. Exactly what was going through his mind, Henrik couldn't be sure as Tino bent back down and kissed him again.

“I don’t want to keep this a secret anymore.” he said, caressing his cheek. “You’re too important, and you mean too much to me—I’ll tell them everything tomorrow but...” He pulled off his shirt and kissed him deeply again. “But for now, before we know what happens, we belong to each other, okay?”

Henrik nodded, pulling Tino into another kiss as they began to unbutton his shirt together.

They didn’t know what would happen in the morning, but it didn’t matter. For now, all they needed was each other.

Tino didn’t wake with a start—rather he was gently roused to consciousness. He found himself nestled in Henrik’s arms as he held him tightly. His breaths were steady, indicating that he hadn’t been asleep for a long time. Tino shifted slightly, and Henrik loosened his grip, meeting his eyes behind silver framed glasses.

“Good morning,” Tino sighed happily, reaching up and pushing golden blond hair out of his boyfriend's face.

“It’s the afternoon,” Henrik said. “Let you sleep.”

“Oh,” Tino mumbled. That was hardly ideal. Finland’s time zone was ten hours ahead, which would mean that he would have to wait until the late hours of the night to call home. That would certainly prove to be a challenge. He couldn’t bear to be quiet about such an important part of his life anymore. He wanted them to know, he wanted to share this part of himself and for them to see how happy he was. Even though he knew he hadn’t been with Henrik for very long...it just felt *right*. Things clicked where they didn’t before. He felt comfortable.

Tino sat up, blankets falling down to reveal a torso covered in bruises, scratches, and teeth marks. He blushed and looked over to Henrik, who was sporting similar injuries as he too sat upright. He laughed and put a hand on his boyfriend’s chest, tracing the indents and bruises that led all the way up to his neck. His face was a light red, looking away from him.

“Embarrassed?” Tino teased.

“...Mm.”

“Don’t be.” He wrapped a hand under his chin and pulled him close, kissing his lips and massaging his shoulders. It felt wonderful to be loved like this, knowing that each and every bump and bruise was something they had chosen to do together. They were conscious decisions, made without the influence of alcohol and done to prove their love to each other. To show how deeply they cared, by leaving a mark on their bodies.

As much as he would’ve liked staying in bed, it was already the middle of the day. He and Henrik stood, revealing the full extent of their marks.

“...Long sleeves?” Henrik asked, tracing down Tino’s arms.

“Long sleeves,” he agreed. He wouldn’t wear his father’s jacket today. He fully intended to appear without it. He would be calling his family on his computer. If they were going to say something to him, they’d have to say it to his face.

Tino and Henrik went to the closet together, with Henrik putting on a green flannel and jeans while Tino put on his leather jacket and biking pants. Maybe it was a bit ridiculous, but wearing clothes like that made him feel powerful, like he was in control of his own fate. Covered in spikes, he was someone who deserved to be listened to and demanded respect. He could only hope his family would give him that when he chose to reveal his current partner.

When they were done dressing, Tino let out a little sigh. Perhaps they had been a bit too eager the night previous, as the marks trailed all the way up their necks. He had a way to cover it up, it was just a bit of work. He bent over in his closet, digging through the tub which contained his Santa suit to pull out a small bottle of concealer. It wasn't much, but it would do just fine.

"Kulta, can you come here?" he said gently. He did so, standing by his side and laying his arms over Tino's shoulders. He blinked, lashes batting idly as a small smile rested on his lips. "Bend down a bit," he instructed, "I need to clean you up."

"Mm," Henrik responded, doing exactly as he said. It didn't take too long, and after the makeup was thoroughly rubbed into his skin, it looked like there had never been bruises at all. He was quick to do the same to himself. The only thing that would make those bruises go away would be time—and he wasn't about to subjugate their poor roommates to seeing them before they faded. Not to mention, it probably wouldn't help his case to his family if he looked so...disheveled.

"All done," Tino hummed, rubbing in the last of the makeup on his neck.

"...You did a good job," Henrik mumbled, looking over his skin. "Not noticeable at all."

"Thanks," Tino replied.

He stood up and went over to his desk, looking over pictures of family that may or may not accept him. He sighed gently, opening the frame of two photos and stuffing them in his pocket. His grandfather's portrait, and the picture of the two of them together. He wanted to believe that if his mother didn't take the news well then at least his grandfather would stand up for him. They hadn't been close for all these years only to be pushed away, right?

Tino and Henrik left their room together and descended the stairs—pleased to see that the puzzle from last night still remained uncompleted. No one had touched it at all. Hana was quick to join them at their feet, yipping, barking and putting her paws up against their legs. Henrik bent over and picked her up, kissing the soft white fur on her head.

The house was incredibly quiet—especially for the afternoon. Tino supposed that their roommates had stayed up even later than he and Henrik had, too busy watching movies to bother coming home, at least until the sun came up.

They sat down on the couch together, with Tino leaning on Henrik's body as they looked over the puzzle from the night before. It had a few new connected pieces, but otherwise was completely untouched from how it had been left last night.

"Want to help me?" Tino asked with a slight sigh. "We'll have to wait a while."

"Mm."

The day went by in an excruciatingly slow crawl, which wasn't helped by Tino's constant checking of the time. He needed to wait for an appropriate hour to call home, which would be at about 10 pm because of timezones. Henrik tried his best to keep Tino off his nerves by taking him out on a walk

with Hana, watching movies together, or, much to the delight of their roommates, trying to teach him to dance to gentle and soft music. He wasn't very good at it. Tino had been a bit of a wreck in the hours that led up to the night. He'd needed to do a lot of deep breathing exercises, steadying himself in preparation for what was to come. His withdrawal symptoms had been getting better, but they still left him with a bit more anxiety than he'd like.

At around 8, Tino brought his computer down to the living room. He wanted to have the call there, sitting on the couch. He feared that calling from their bedroom would be...too intimate for their liking. At 8:30 he went up the stairs and got out his father's jacket, not actually putting it on and only clutching to it as he bounced his foot up and down in his impatience. He could hardly sit still, leaving Henrik and Hana to try and comfort him and keep his mind off things until the time came. His boyfriend knew better than to try and talk him out of this decision. He'd made his stance clear last night, and now it was just a matter of actually following through with it.

The second the clock struck 10, Tino had pressed the call button on his computer. Henrik was sitting a little bit away from him, holding their dog in his arms. He was off-screen, and would remain that way until Tino was to introduce him to them. He had his hands engulfed in the fabric of his father's jacket, nervously running his hands through it as he watched the call ring and ring until finally the lines connected.

Tino inhaled sharply, twisting his fingers together and sitting up as straight as he could, making sure his father's jacket was out of view from the camera. Tino was strong, and powerful. He was deserving of being respected and would not be upset by any insults that were thrown his way. His family would accept him and be happy for him. His family would love Henrik, and wouldn't dream of ever saying anything rude to him...not that he would understand the words anyway.

His mother's face appeared on the screen. She looked visibly tired, with straw blonde hair just like Tino's falling to the sides of her face. Her eyes, which were crinkled up in a rare little smile, were that same soft lilac.

"Tino!" She exclaimed happily through the computer screen, "I'm so happy to see you!" She, along with the rest of his family, only spoke Finnish, which would only make this encounter slightly easier, as he didn't have to worry about fumbling his words as much. She was sitting in the living room of his old house, from back when he had lived in Finland, though he couldn't see much of it because she was taking up most of the screen.

"Hi," he said awkwardly. His hand instinctively went to the back of his neck and he scratched it.

"It's been so long since it was you calling and not me!"

He knew she probably wasn't trying to do it intentionally, but a weight of guilt sat in Tino's chest.

"I—" he stuttered.

"And you look so handsome!" She leaned forward, moving closer to the camera.

"Thanks, Mom, but—"

"It's really such a shame you don't have a girlfriend yet." She continued to say, somehow always making every conversation they had into the same one. *"Girls love a man who can sweep her off her feet. Especially a man with an accent. How good is your English? Do people ask where—"*

"Mom!" Tino interrupted her.

"Oh!" She sat up in surprise. *"You need to calm down, Nassikka, there's really no need to yell."*

Tino kneaded his fingers together through his father's jacket, looking down into his lap briefly before bringing his gaze back up. "Sorry," he apologized.

"Now, what did you want to say?" she asked. She was trying to sound patient, but it sounded more like she was scolding him.

"...I need to tell you something." He inhaled steeply.

She raised an eyebrow, leaning only slightly into the camera.

Tino dug his nails into his palms. *"...I've been seeing someone."* He turned his head to look at his boyfriend, who was still sitting out a view. He had a blank expression on his face, as he obviously didn't know what was being said, but when he met Tino's eyes he gave him an encouraging smile.

"Seeing someone?!" his mother exclaimed happily. *"Why didn't you tell me?!"* She sounded so...proud, relieved, excited, *"Show her to me! When do I get to meet my future daughter in law?!"*

"Daughter in law?!" Tino repeated, gobsmacked that she would even think such a thing.

"Yes! Yes! She's your first girlfriend, and so of course you'll be soon to marry," She put her hand on her cheek. *"You always were such a romantic. Have I been too pushy? Is that why you haven't told me about her?"* Tino dug his nails further into his palms. She was certainly right about one thing, just not in the way she thought. *"So! What's she like? Can I meet her?"* She began to babble excitedly, *"Is that why you're calling so early? So I could see her? You're such a sweet boy, Nassikka—"*

"Mother!" he interrupted again. She sat up in her seat, but something diverted her attention from him. She turned her head away, gesturing off camera for someone to come closer.

"Oh! Dad! Come here—Tino was just about to introduce me to his new girlfriend!"

Tino's eyes widened, and he stuffed his hands further under his father's jacket, pressing into them with his nails until he felt such an immense amount of pain that he was sure they were drawing blood. His mother moved away from the screen slightly, and his grandfather sat down and joined her. He slicked back the gray hair that was falling over his eyes, pools of lilac staring through the screen and making Tino shiver with slight cold.

"Girlfriend?" growled the deep and rich voice of his grandfather. *"Show her to me."*

"Oh! It's like I always thought," chirped his mother. *"He always had an aversion to Finnish girls! It only makes sense he'd find the right one in America!"*

Tino swallowed, feeling his heart pounding and his breath catch. He wanted to reach up, to clutch at the cross necklace around his neck, but he did no such action. He couldn't show weakness, especially not now. He straightened further.

"Mom, Grandpa," his breath hitched in his anxiety but he continued forward with his words, glancing off camera at Henrik and gesturing for him to come closer, *"I'd like you to meet my Boyfriend."*

"...Boyfriend?" his mother repeated, her face contorting to a confused expression that was soon replaced by a tight frown. The joy and happiness in her eyes seemed to disappear as she narrowed them, crossing her arms as she studied every aspect of Henrik's face.

Tino sat up as tall as he could, taking Henrik's hand in his and holding it up so that his family could see. "This is Henrik," he said firmly. "He is my boyfriend."

His grandfather turned away from the camera, snarling teeth obviously showing distaste. *"You have terrible jokes, Nassikka."*

"I'm not joking," he replied. His voice was stiff and jagged, being careful not to release a hint of emotion. He squeezed Henrik's hand and his boyfriend squeezed it back, looking at him in obvious concern. He may not speak Finnish, but he surely understood the terrible reaction his family was having.

"...*You're not?*" his mother said weakly.

"No." Tino said confidently.

His mother's eyes narrowed further. *"I see,"* she said. She stood up, turning away from the camera. *"You just want to punish me. You know how much I want grandchildren, and so you're doing everything you can to keep them from me. You want to punish me because I'm not your dad."* She turned around and snarled at him. *"Well I'm sorry, Nassikka, I'm sorry that I wasn't good enough for you. I'm sorry that your father died. I miss him too, but that won't bring him back! It's not my fault he died! Please, stop hurting me! All I wanted was a normal son."*

"Enough," Grandfather Korhonen said to his daughter, patting her back while leering at the camera. *"He is ungrateful. Do not waste your emotions on him. He feels nothing of your pain."* He said nothing else but he communicated his vitriolic disgust through the look in his haunting eyes.

Tino could hardly respond, he felt Henrik's hands on his shoulders, attempting to soothe him. His grandfather, who he had looked up to and admired for so many years, who had always been there for him after the death of his father, who had been the one to tell him to go to America was looking at him like he was less than a speck of dirt on the underside of his boot.

"Hang up," Henrik urged quietly into Tino's ear. He didn't know what was happening, but almost definitely knew enough to understand that staying on this call wouldn't be the best idea.

Tino didn't care.

"A normal son?!" Tino repeated, his voice teetering on the edge of rage. "How could you say that?!" His heart was beating so quickly in his chest that his entire body was shaking.

"Yes! A normal son! Who would marry a woman!"

"I don't want a woman!" Tino exclaimed. "I never have!"

His mother whaled at those words, pushing herself into Grandfather Korhonen's arms. *"Why do you have to be so selfish? You're my only child, Nassikka, you have to continue our family name!"*

"Enough," Grandfather Korhonen attempted to interject, but Tino and his mother were too busy fighting to pay it any mind.

"Selfish?!" He felt his hands ball into tight fists. "I'm not selfish for wanting to live my own life! I'm happy now! I'm happier than I've been in years! And it's not like I can't adopt children! Don't act like this is a death sentence! So what if I'm in love with a man?! It doesn't matter! "

“Clearly it does,” his mother spat venomously, “You’re forfeiting your life, your biological children, and your livelihood! Why are you so insistent on making me miserable! Can’t you see that I want what’s best for you?!”

Tino held the cross around his neck, clutching it until his knuckles were white. *“Clearly you only want what’s best for yourself! You don’t care about my happiness!”*

His mother groaned a loud cry, tears falling into Grandfather Korhonen’s shoulder as it muffled her screams. *“You are a terrible son, Nassikka, I should’ve known this would happen when your dad died. I could’ve done something to stop it. Without him, you’ve turned into this disgusting delinquent. I want the old Nassikka back. It’s his fault. Everything is his fault.”*

And it was at that moment that he finally snapped.

“Don’t talk about dad!” Tino roared, newly enraged by the insult on his father, “Don’t *ever* say something like that.”

She had no right, none at all to talk about him like this. He couldn’t understand it. She had once loved that man. She had cared for him more than anything. But those days were long gone. His mother always had to be the victim...didn’t she?

“It’s his fault,” his mother repeated, *“It’s all his fault.”*

“Shut the fuck up! Take that back!” he yelled, standing up and pointing at the computer.



"Enough," Grandfather Korhonen yelled. The room fell tensely silent. Tino sat back down his palms tightly interlocked as he noticed that his father's jacket was now visible through the camera lens. But

his grandfather had noticed a while ago. How long had it been on screen?

“Dad,” His mother attempted to interject. Grandfather Korhonen silenced her.

“*Nassikka, you have shown today that you are unworthy of your father’s name and coat.*” He said coldly. “*You are dead to us until you decide you are done with this little game. Do you understand?*” He didn’t leave time for Tino to answer. “*Feel lucky that you have a scholarship, because that’s the only reason you’re still going to school.*”

His mother sat up triumphantly, her lips forming a long line. “*Don’t call back.*” she said.

Tino was unsure of what happened next. The slamming shut of his computer, the feeling of Henrik’s arms around him, or the searing pain of his nails digging into his palms. He just couldn’t be sure, he was too upset, too hurt, to process any of it. So instead, he stood there, breathing hard and panting breaths as he looked down at the laptop on the table in front of him. His jacket fell off his lap and onto the ground below.

“Tino!” Henrik said urgently. “You okay?”

“Get off.” Tino replied.

“What happened?”

“Get off!” he screamed. He threw his boyfriend’s arms away, running his hands through his hair. His breaths became quick and heavy, his head spinning as he covered his face with his arms. Everything hurt too much; his eyes were stinging, threatening to burst with tears. Everything had happened in the worst way it could have. He was unable to even process the memory, shaking his head and grinding his teeth together in agony.

He needed something, anything to make it better.

...And there was only one thing that could.

Tino stood. “I’m getting a *fucking* cigarette!”

Henrik stopped him before he got far, gripping at his wrist. It wasn’t firm enough to hold him there, but that wasn’t the point. “No,” he said, “you can’t.”

“Why the *fuck* not?!” he swore again, ripping his hand back. He stomped over to the door, pretending not to notice the four faces of their roommates watching motionlessly from the top of the staircase.

“You’re trying to quit,” Henrik said, following him. “You don’t want to smoke anymore.”

Tino turned, sneering at someone who he knew had done nothing wrong, looking after him with such concern and worry that it made him sick. “*You* don’t know what I need! *You* don’t control me!” He threw open the front door of the house, stepping out into the freezing cold darkness and heading to the passenger seat of his car. The outside was illuminated solely by the blinking green lights of the Christmas decorations, unable to change to any other color. “I can make my own choices! I can smoke if I want! I can have as many cigarettes as I damn well please!” Hana followed them outside, wagging her tail like she had no idea what was happening around her. A cigarette would give him control. Smoking was his own decision and something he did of his own volition. It was damage that he chose to inflict upon himself. Sure, people told him not to, that he had to stop for his own health and well-being, but they were wrong. He needed to be the person that was in charge of his destiny, he would

make every choice because he wanted to. And sometimes that meant taking in that terrible black smoke.

Henrik beat him to it, reaching into the car and taking out his pack and his lighter. He held them up in the air, high above Tino's head.

Tino could only stare at him, his skin feeling as cold as ice. His boyfriend holding his only lifeline so far out of reach.

Hana barked.

"Give them back," he growled lowly.

"No," he said. "You don't want this."

"Why won't anyone *fucking* listen to me?!" Tino screamed. "Let me make my own choices!" He threw himself at Henrik, reaching and pulling desperately at his arm to lower the one thing he knew would fix this. The one thing that he knew would bring it all back and make everything better. "Give them to me! I need them!" Frustrated tears began to leak out of the corners of his eyes.



“You don’t,” Henrik said gently, “Distract yourself, count the stars, remember?”

“Fuck your stars!” he screamed. “Give me my cigarettes! They’re all I have!”

Immediately, he felt Henrik’s arm loosen, and Tino snatched his things back from him, not even pausing to glance at the man in front of him as he desperately fiddled with the lighter. Hana yipped at his feet, pawing at him and begging to be held. Tino ignored her.

“All you have?” Henrik repeated weakly.

“Yes!” Tino exclaimed absentmindedly, flicking the roller of the lighter until it finally held a flame.

He pulled a cigarette out of the box and forced the end of it into the flame of the lighter, only able to breathe out a sigh of relief as the smoke filled his lungs. A wave of calm washed over him, that familiar feeling soothing him like nothing else ever could. He closed his eyes and opened them again, watching the cloud of blackness pour out of his mouth and disappear into the night around him.

“...What about me?”

Tino turned and looked at Henrik, cold pricking at his body until he couldn’t feel it anymore. His anger immediately melted away as he met his eyes. His mouth hung open slightly in his shock. Those pools of beautiful, strong sea-green were now glossy and sad. Immediately, Tino realized his mistake.

“I—Henrik,” he stuttered.

His boyfriend shook his head and turned, not even looking to face him as he walked towards the front door of the house.

Tino reached his hand forward, taking a couple of steps in an attempt to reach him. “I—” he called desperately, “Henrik, wait!”

He didn’t.

His boyfriend disappeared back inside the house, closing the door with such quiet softness that Tino couldn’t even hear it.

His outstretched arm fell to his side.

Hana pawed at Tino’s legs and he picked her up, not even caring that streams of tears were falling down his face as he stared at that closed door. He wanted to be angry, to swear at him for being sensitive and making a big deal out of nothing. But he couldn’t, because that wasn’t true. And now Henrik was gone. And now Tino was alone. Truly and utterly alone, save for a dog who didn’t know any better. His family was repulsed by him, and Henrik had been hurt by venomous words that he hadn’t even meant. It wasn’t true. None of it was. He’d had so much, but now, he had nothing; Nothing but the cold and empty blackness of the night.

Tino took in another puff of his cigarette and wiped his eyes, turning away from the house and walking into the freezing cold blackness around him. He had lost everything, and now he could do nothing but walk forward.

Chapter 21

Chapter Notes



The door shut and it was quiet.

There was nothing, not a single sound to be heard.

Henrik leaned against the back of the door, a long sigh escaping his lips as he stared up at the ceiling.

Of course, he knew Tino didn't mean it. But it didn't make it hurt any less. To be told that he meant nothing to him, and that he didn't need him; To be told that all he needed were his cigarettes. Those cigarettes that Tino wanted to stop using so desperately. He tried to help him, maybe if he'd been in a better state he would've seen that he was right. He knew he didn't like them, he'd been trying to get clean. He'd been 8 months clean before he met him.

...Maybe he would've been better off having never met Henrik at all. He certainly would've smoked less cigarettes.

Henrik sighed and wiped at his eyes. No tears had fallen from them, but he still didn't enjoy the stinging feeling that resonated there. He wasn't sure what else he could do, his heart weighing like lead in his chest and his feet being so stuck to the ground that he was sure some unknown deity was holding him there.

He wanted to run outside, to open that door and say that he forgave him, but he also wanted to stay here, inside his home, where it was safe. He wanted to be with Tino, but he also wanted to be alone. He wanted to call Mathias and talk to him about it, but he knew that his friend was probably already asleep. It was well past 11 after all, and Mathias had always been the type to go to sleep early. His posture crumpled, as he sat on the floor. His hand instinctively went over his heart, feeling its steady beating through his chest. Sea-green eyes clamped shut as he looked to the ground.

He didn't have Mathias. He didn't have Tino either, or Emil, or Lukas. He was alone.

Suddenly he was engulfed in the warmth of an embrace. The body was small, and cold, with tiny hands that wrapped around him. Henrik melted into it. He smelled like old books, like deep running water, and just a whiff of alcohol.

Raivis.



“Are you okay?” he asked, a smooth, worried whisper filling his ears.

Henrik didn't reply, only holding him tighter.

Raivis reached his hands up, rubbing his shoulders and gently encouraging him to loosen. He could've said something, saying that he had been right all those nights ago, when he had warned him. He had told him to be careful to not 'get incinerated by his blaze' or whatever the hell it was that he said. He'd had no idea what that was supposed to mean back then. Though, he supposed he did now. Henrik should've listened to him.

Raivis encouraged him to steady his feet and walked him away from the front door. They went into the living room where he and Tino had been just moments before. He sat him down on the couch, where Eduard, Tolys, and Feliks were waiting. Eduard was picking up Tino's jacket from the floor, his eyes full of worry as he dusted it off.

No one bothered to ask what happened; it was all too obvious. All Henrik did was reach forward for Tino's jacket, which was quickly surrendered to him. He brought it to his face as he slumped in his seat, his elbows resting on his knees as he held the fabric close. It smelled just like him, like roasted chestnuts and sugar, like sweet cinnamon and gingerbread. He breathed in the scent as he felt his heart pang viciously in his chest.

"Is he outside?" Eduard asked, putting a hand on Henrik's shoulder and rubbing it reassuringly.

He didn't look up to meet his eyes, only nodding as he held his head in his hands.

He hugged him briefly. "It'll be okay, buddy," he mumbled. When he released his arms, he stood up. "I'm gonna go get him." There were some footsteps, and then the sound of the door being open and shut, signaling his departure. When he was gone, his spot on the couch was filled by Tolys, who had slid in next to him. He too put his hands on Henrik's shoulders, massaging him and attempting to make him feel better—much like a parent would. He felt Raivis touch him too, rubbing his arm in comfort.

When Eduard returned a few minutes later, it wasn't with the same calmness as before, he was frantic, slamming the door shut as he ran back to the living room. It was such a loud sound that it made Henrik's head snap up and out of his hands.

"He's not outside," Eduard said, shivering with cold.

Henrik's heart skipped a beat. "...What?" he said, in a voice so small and weak that he was sure no one heard it at all.

Tino was gone. He'd left. He hadn't even considered that he'd go. Was this his fault? Or, was he making things about himself? He really wasn't sure. He had no idea what happened on that phone call, and frankly he was afraid to know.

"Where did he go?!" Tolys asked urgently, glancing to the front door before looking to Henrik, probably thinking he had some kind of answer.

"He doesn't know," Raivis said. His voice was a bit raised, perhaps in agitation that he would even bother asking. For once, Henrik was grateful that he was able to read him so easily.

Eduard went to the coat rack, putting on a light blue coat and picking up Tino's hockey jacket. "His motorcycle and car are still here, he can't have gone far." He ran a hand through his hair, which sparkled a bit less than it usually did. "He'll freeze out there." Before anyone else could say anything, Eduard turned and left, calling Tino's name as he shut the door behind him.

Henrik hugged the jacket in his lap tighter, because it was his fault he was gone. And now, he was alone, in the freezing darkness outside. He had Hana at least, maybe she could keep him warm? He shouldn't have been so stupid, to hold his cigarettes above his head. He should've known that doing something like that would only make him more upset. He leaned back on the couch. Raivis and Tolys were at his sides, looking over him with concerned faces as Feliks stood awkwardly to the side, obviously wanting to comfort him but unsure of how to do so. Would he be okay out there? He could only hope.

"...Uh..." Feliks stuttered shyly, "...Do you want some water?" Tolys looked completely shocked that his friend had spoken at all, but Henrik paid it no mind.

He gave a tiny nod, and Feliks promptly went to the kitchen, going to fetch it for him. When he came back, Henrik was only able to take a tiny sip of the drink he had brought before he had to put it down on the coffee table. There were too many things on his mind, too many thoughts running through his brain to be able to focus on the present. He'd been hurt by Tino's words but he just wanted him to be safe and inside the warmth of their home. They could talk things out later. All that mattered was that he was okay.

"He'll be back," Raivis said, still rubbing his arm.

"Yes," Tolys agreed, "he'll be alright too! You know how bad Finnish winters are, I'm sure this is nothing to him. He'll be fine!" Somehow, that didn't reassure him.

"...You think so?" Henrik managed to croak.

Raivis gave him a reassuring nod.

"Um—so like," Feliks squeaked, his voice uncomfortably high as he pressed his fingers into his forearms in discomfort. "You guys are like...together right?"

"Feliks!" Tolys hissed. "Not the time!"

Henrik ignored him and answered the question. "...Mm,"

"...Oh! Uh—Then you shouldn't worry. He'll be back." His words were fast in his nervousness but he had a miniscule little encouraging smile on his face. "Because—he um—he loves you!"

...Henrik certainly hoped he would. But that was a ridiculous thought. Of course Tino loved him. It was blindingly obvious in practically everything he did. Why else would he hold his hand like it was almost second nature, or kiss him and call him pet names? Why else would he hug him and hold him close, or try out all his hobbies—even if he was terrible at them? And most importantly, if he didn't love him, then why did he look at him the way he did? The answer was, of course, because he actually did love him. He'd never been afraid to tell him so. And now, he was outside in the cold, and though Henrik didn't know much Finnish, he'd understood enough to know that whatever had been said on that call was bad enough for Tino to yell, for him to fight and scream until he had nothing left in him. Until the only thing that could calm him down was the deep black smoke of a cigarette.

"A—and then, you'll, like, forgive each other," Feliks continued to say. "People that love each other hurt each other sometimes. But as long as you apologize, it'll like, be okay...I think."

Henrik closed his eyes and pushed up the glasses on his nose, letting out a long sigh. That certainly sounded nice.

When he opened his eyes again, Raivis, Tolys, and Feliks were still looking down on him. Cerulean, verdant green, and dull jade, all staring at him with such concern and sympathy. He could hardly believe that they were spending their evening like this, comforting him in this way. They could be doing any number of other things. Raivis could be writing his poetry and watching those Korean dramas he loved so much, and Tolys and Feliks could be upstairs, chatting away like they usually did...Instead, they were here, sitting with him. And Eduard, who could be playing games on his computer, was instead outside in the freezing cold, trying to find his best friend in the icy blackness. He felt bad for disrupting them. Doubtlessly, they'd much rather be doing other things than sitting with him.

"Sorry," Henrik apologized, "Probably not the way you want to spend your night."

"Oh! That's okay!" Tolys said reassuringly. "We don't mind at all!"

"...Yeah," Feliks said, his eyes lowered to the ground, "No one's perfect all the time." He glanced at Tolys before finally settling his gaze on Henrik again. "People make mistakes...So, like Of course we don't mind!"

Raivis nodded in agreement with the other two, continuing to soothingly pat his arm. Even if he didn't say much, he communicated so much through his actions alone, showing Henrik how much he cared.

"...Thanks," Henrik muttered.

A long while later, Eduard returned. He'd burst through the door and slammed his weight against it, shivering with cold. His teeth were chattering and his ears and nose were a bright red. He was wearing the jacket he'd brought for Tino on top of the one he had already had on.

"I couldn't find him," was all he said.

He stumbled over to the couch, collapsing onto it.

The room was completely quiet save for the breaths of the five people inside.

Tino was nowhere to be found. He was truly gone.

He felt weak in his chest, and he placed a hand on his chest, fiddling with the buttons of his shirt. What if he *didn't* come back? Or, maybe he would return only to say that he was leaving again. His heart ached, not knowing whether he'd want him to come with him. And what would happen after that? Would his heart stop working again? Would he be forced to live a life without being able to feel romantic love again? He realized that it had been a long time since he'd even considered that. He pulled harder on the buttons. If Tino left, would things go back to how they used to be—back when he wasn't sure if he could love at all. Was it better to know that you *can* experience love but might never feel it again, or be unsure if that feeling is something you can ever have.

"What do we do?" Henrik said, his voice weak with despair.

"Wait," Raivis replied.

Tolys nodded, "I think that's all we *can* do."

"He'll—" Eduard said through his chattering teeth, "He'll co—come back—when he's ready."

Henrik could only hope. Because Tino loved him. And as long as that was true, he'd return to him. He just needed to have faith that he would.

Feliks looked on at the four of them, dull jade eyes sliding over their company as he put on a nervous little smile. “It’ll, like, be okay!” he said, “We gotta cheer up!” He pulled out his phone—which was a light pink with a little cat charm hanging off it—and held it out above his head. “Let’s uh—let’s take a picture together!”

Henrik was hardly in the mood for something like that, but he supposed he needed some way to fill the time. His three roommates shuffled closer to him, and Feliks leaned down, crouching a little on the floor and snapping a picture. It took him a couple of tries, because of how nervous he seemed. His hands were shaking a lot. Eventually though, he shoved his phone in their face, apparently displeased with the results.

“Guys, like, you look so sad.” he said.

“I wonder why.” Raivis replied dryly.

Feliks ignored him, crouching back down and putting the phone back in position. “Did you guys like, know that Tolys had a massive crush on Ivan’s pseudo-sister in grade school and like, when she kissed him he threw up on her.”

The entire room burst into uproarious laughter.

“Feliks!” Tolys screamed, his entire face lit up bright red. “What the hell?!”

“Du—de, are you kidding me?” Eduard hardly managed to say through his chuckling. “What is it with you Ivan?!”

“He just *loves* tall people with white hair,” Raivis muttered, smiling a little.

“Clearly,” Eduard replied, giggling to himself, “How did we not know about this?!”

“Because I made Feliks swear to secrecy,” Tolys replied through his teeth.

Feliks shrugged. “It was like, worth it to break the tension.” He said nonchalantly, “Look at this like, awesome picture I got. He held up his phone, revealing the hilarious photo of everyone’s shocked reaction to the revelation. Eduard was crying from laughing, Raivis was snickering, Feliks looked sly and catty, Tolys looked so embarrassed he was going to strangle his friend, and Henrik looked... somewhat amused. “And like, we can change the filter too.” Feliks said, swiping left on his phone so that they all had massive cat ears.

“Feliks, you’re lucky I’m nice,” Tolys said, his eyes narrowed in embarrassed contempt.

Feliks smiled at him. “I know,” he replied.

He handed his phone over to Eduard, who was snickering at all the stupid filters he could put on that photo. If Henrik was in a better mood, perhaps he would’ve laughed along with him, but his heart still felt heavy. Because there should be six people in that picture. He wished Tino was with them.

Tino squeezed his leather jacket around his shivering frame, puffing at the cigarette between his lips as he stared at the ground. Hana was wiggling in his arms, wanting to be let down, but he held her to his chest instead. After he left the house, he just started walking. He had paid no attention to where he was going, perhaps going left instead of right, and staying on the path when he shouldn’t have. When he looked up at the houses surrounding him, he had absolutely no idea where he was. So, he just kept walking.

If he hadn't had his cigarette, he definitely would've had a panic attack, so if he could be grateful for one thing, it would be that. As much as he resented the fact that he was spending his time smoking, he had to be thankful that his head felt alright. He brought it to his lips and felt the smoke pour out of his mouth, disappearing into the air above him as he held Hana tighter. She was warm and Tino was freezing cold. It wasn't the coldest night, far from it, but perhaps he was so emotionally cold that he was unable to produce any heat at all...if that made any sense.

He took in another deep puff of smoke and Hana squirmed in his arms, unrelenting as she tried to get out of Tino's grasp.

"Hey, Hana, what's wrong?" he asked. She was a dog, so she didn't answer. He gripped her tighter, holding her around her chest as she squirmed. Tino wanted her close, he wanted her to stay with him. But Hana thrashed and yowled like she was fighting for her life. Her barks were sharp, sounding almost pained, but Tino didn't want to let go. He needed her to stay. He needed her to be with him.

She got a hold of his hand and bit him.

Tino dropped her.

Hana landed on the path gracefully, staring up at him with warm brown eyes. Her demeanor had changed, and she was completely calm.

"Hana?" Tino asked, crouching down to pick her up again. "What's wrong, girl?" He reached his arms out to her, trying to appease her by petting her. But she allowed no such thing. She took a step back before she turned and ran. Her white fur shone like a beacon in the darkness, but it wasn't long before she disappeared completely from his view.

"Hana! Wait!" Tino desperately called after her. He broke into a sprint, feeling frenzied as he chased after the only thing he felt he had left. He was coughing and choking on the smoke but he didn't care. He wanted Hana back. Despite his burning lungs he pushed onward, hoping that if he ran far enough he would find her. But she never came back into view. The clacking of her paws against the pavement became distant until they couldn't be heard at all.

Tino's eyes watered as he began to cough again. He stopped, being unable to move any further as the sound of his hacking filled the quiet night air. His throat felt like it was cracking open inside, and that the only thing he could do to resolve it was wait until the coughing fit had passed. Tino crumpled into the grass next to the path as he succumbed to his choking.

When his fit ceased, he sat in silence for a moment. He was colder than he had been before, his clothes lightly soaked by the damp lawn he was sitting on. The bite that Hana had given him wasn't severe. She hadn't wanted to hurt him, she only wanted to be let go. The land was on a slight incline. There weren't any houses around this part of the neighborhood, despite that, there was a trashcan nearby. The icy wind was harsh, and seemed to be worse now than it had been when he'd first left. Tino shivered, tucking his legs close to his torso and running his hands up and down his arms.

His family had disowned him. Maybe not completely in a technical sense, but that didn't matter. The only way back in would be to pretend; to pretend to be happy for the rest of his life. And so maybe, he didn't want to go back to them anyway. They'd hurt him, and that was their fault. He didn't want an apology. He wanted to disappear from them and never be contacted again. They're the ones who ruined their relationship, and Tino wouldn't allow himself to bear the responsibilities of their mistakes.



He leaned back, laying on the ground and staring at the stars as he took another drag of his cigarette. The thick smoke surrounded him for a moment before it was blown away by a sharp wind. The night sky shone brightly, hundreds upon thousands of stars that twinkled from millions upon billions of miles away. Each one was its own little sun, tucked away in its small part of the galaxy. These stars that shone so brightly now may already be gone, as by the time their light managed to travel to Earth, they had already faded. They were gone, and yet they were still remembered, captured for just a little bit longer in the night sky. Tino grabbed at his necklace, tugging on it as he reminisced.

He'd cursed those stars, the ones that Henrik loved so dearly.

An immense amount of guilt weighed on him, remembering the look of hurt on his boyfriend's face. How sad he had been from what he had said. When he told him that he didn't need him and that all that he needed were his cigarettes. His cigarettes that he hated and wished he would stop smoking. Tino could only *hope* that Henrik would want to remain his boyfriend after this. He really wouldn't blame him if he wanted to leave.

Tino felt tears stinging at his eyes. This time, they were not from his coughing.

Tino sat up, hugging his knees as he cried into them, his packet of cigarettes and lighter squeezing out of his pockets as he sobbed harder and harder. He felt like such an idiot, that everything was his fault and that if he'd just been less of an asshole this would have never happened. He'd gotten too upset and he'd lashed out, hurting someone who he knew did nothing wrong.

He'd just been unable to stop himself.

Looking up at those stars, he just wished he could be with Henrik now. When he'd point at some dot in the sky and he'd tell him that it was Venus or Saturn, and Tino would nod along—even though it just looked like a regular old dot to him.

He felt another blow of harsh wind against his skin and he began to shiver. It seemed that he was only getting colder, regardless of the jacket that was supposed to protect him from it. He puffed at his cigarette again, only to discover that he'd reached the end of it. He sighed and stood, going over to the trashcan and rubbing the flames out against it before tossing it inside.

Already, he felt the aching need for another one.

But he wouldn't give into that.

He *wanted* to quit.

Before he knew what he was doing he picked up his pack and his lighter from the ground, shivering from the cold as he held them over the trash can. He felt his hands shake, his mind clouded with uncertainty. Was this the right thing to do? He willed himself to release the box but found himself unable to do so. Long, deep breaths filled his lungs.

His cigarettes wouldn't control him anymore.

He didn't need them.

He would be better off without them.

Tino viciously twisted the fingers of his other hand before going up to clutch at the cross around his neck. No longer would he keep an extra pack with him, 'just in case'. As much as these cigarettes were helpful to soothing his anxiety, they weren't the answer to his problem. It wasn't worth the potential to cut his life short—just so he didn't have to have panic attacks anymore. He wanted to be free, free from the addiction that had chained him for so long. He may have failed before, but maybe this time was right.

He squeezed his eyes shut, and then dropped them inside.

Immediately, a wave of relief hit him as he felt himself collapse back down on the ground below, tears streaming down his face as he smiled. He wouldn't let those damn things hurt him anymore, and he also wouldn't let himself hurt others because of them. He would be free. He just needed to stay clean. It wouldn't be cured overnight...but damn did it feel good to get rid of those fucking things. The cold wind was beginning to hit him harder, but despite that he wasn't shivering as much. His hands however, were freezing cold, but as he put them in his pockets he felt some things inside.

He shut his eyes tight as a new wave of tears began to pour out of his eyes. Because never again would he hold him tight, or tell him stories, or reassure him that he was making the right choices. His

father had been right about him, and he had just been too blind to see it. He was a rotten old man. A rotten old man who'd tricked him into caring for him.

He crumpled the photos in his hands.

But then, a voice hit his ears.

"...Tino? Is that you?"

He immediately launched his head up, scanning the perimeter to see who could possibly be walking around at this hour, someone who recognized him no less.

It was Ivan.

He was walking on the footpath with Hana in his arms. His long white scarf was blowing in the whipping wind, trailing behind him as he walked closer. He had such a concerned look on his face, and though he towered above him, he immediately lowered himself, cautious eyes asking if it was okay for him to come closer.

In the past, Tino probably would've turned his nose up in disgust, not even wanting to be seen with someone like Ivan. He was terrible, vicious and cruel. He hurt people and he didn't care. He was manipulative, a liar, someone who couldn't be trusted. Now though, he patted the grass next to him, asking him to sit. Because he knew a man like that wouldn't offer help to someone who he knew hated him.

"What are you doing here?" Tino croaked.

He felt Ivan looking at him, staring as he moved closer to try and comfort him. "I was taking a walk," he said. "Yao lives not far from here. But as I was enjoying my evening my little lost dog came to me." He gestured with his head to Hana, who was sitting comfortably in his arms, licking his hands as he ran them through her fur. "She needed to be returned."

She was so comfortable with him. It only made sense, she had been his dog after all.

"Oh," Tino breathed. He opened his arms slightly, and Hana leapt over to him, bounding into his arms as he shivered against the cold.

"But it seems she was bringing me to you." Ivan said, his voice edging on sadness as he looked over at him.

The wind around them blew fiercely, and Tino hugged Hana closer to him.

"...Are you cold?" Ivan asked gently. His voice was similar to Henrik's except where his was low and deep, Ivan spoke with a high tune that seemed unnatural for his appearance. Still though, they spoke with that same soft timbre and tone. It felt so natural to him, like gentle music filling his ears and making him miss his beloved that he had driven away. He wiped his eyes as he felt them sting again, sniffing against the cold as he nodded. Almost unconsciously, he felt himself lean against Ivan, desperate for warmth but also needing some form of companionship. At this point, he didn't care who it was. Even if the person comforting him was *Ivan Braginsky* of all people.

Ivan straightened in his posture, obviously not expecting the act, especially from someone who he knew—at the very least—disliked him. Still though, he took off his scarf and wrapped it around Tino's neck. He tied tightly, not in malice, but to keep out the cold. Two pairs of lilac stared back at

each other, sad and understanding, comforting and remorseful. Tino didn't mention the bandages around Ivan's bare neck, and Ivan said nothing about the crumpled photographs stuffed in Tino's fist.



As much as his past self would've hated to admit it Ivan was rather...nice.

"...Hanatamago is a good name," Ivan said, looking down to the dog in his lap.

"...Thanks," Tino said sadly. "Henrik liked it a lot too."

Ivan glanced at him, and Tino decided to elaborate. "...My boyfriend," he said quietly. Ivan nodded in understanding. "We got into a fight and I was yelling at him because my family just disowned me and I—" He lost control of his words, barely able to choke back a sob before Ivan interrupted him.

"Shhh," he hushed him gently, rubbing his back and leaning in close. He was awkward at best, like touching someone in this way was uncomfortable and foreign to him. Still though, he remained there.

“My family became lost to me as well,” Ivan mumbled. Clearly, he didn’t do this very often. He regained his composure, looking to Tino before shifting his gaze to the ground and resettling in his position as he started again. “Family is what we make it. Blood means nothing.” Tino leaned harder against him, wiping his eyes. “You can’t change the past,” Ivan said, with such confidence that Tino was sure it was something he often reminded himself of. “You can only apologize and move forward.”

Tino knew he was right. Obviously he was. He ran his hand through Hana’s fur, patting her gently in his lap as he leaned harder against Ivan, the cold still biting at him as they sat in the cool grass together. The other man held him closer.

It was quiet for a long time.

“...Thanks, Ivan,” Tino said.

He nodded, reacting in a way that was similar to what Henrik would’ve done.

“What did you call her? When she was yours?”

“Laika,” Ivan answered.

“That’s a nice name too.” Tino looked down at Hana, and then to the man next to him.

It was quiet for a moment.

“...Is there a reason you couldn’t keep her?”

Ivan sighed and shook his head, looking down to the little dog in Tino’s lap. It was like he was unsure of how to answer, biting the inside of his cheek before he eventually decided to speak. “I was too sick.” His voice was grim and dark, clearly not wanting to discuss the matter any further. “Thank you for caring for her, when I couldn’t.” He reached up to his neck but faltered in his action, seeming to have forgotten that he wasn’t wearing his scarf anymore. He probably didn’t take it off too often.

“Of course,” Tino replied.

It was quiet again.

The wind blew harshly again, and Ivan held him tighter. Tino’s teeth began to chatter aggressively in his mouth.

“You are too cold,” Ivan said.

“...I know,” Tino replied, shivering against him.

“Should you be returned to your home?”

Home.

Home.

Was he ready for something like that? To face the house that he had left behind. To face his roommates who had seen everything? To face Henrik? He could only hope that after all that had happened tonight, that he’d still be there to tell him that he loved him. There was no point putting off the inevitable. If something was to happen between them, it was better to get it out of the way.

“...Yeah,” Tino mumbled. “Let’s go.”

The two of them stood up together, Hana yipping happily in Tino’s arms as they rose to their feet. Ivan supported his back, and the two of them stepped out of the grass and onto the sidewalk.

Ivan hadn’t needed to ask his address, he and Tolys had dated for three years after all. It only made sense that he already knew where they lived. He seemed rather sure of his steps, signaling to Tino that he walked these paths a lot. Perhaps taking a nighttime stroll was part of some kind of daily ritual. All the tenseness left his body as they walked together, and though he was still freezing from the cold and nuzzling himself up to Ivan’s scarf around his neck, he felt safe. He felt protected, and he felt cared for.

He had been wrong to judge Ivan so harshly. It seemed that he really had changed for the better. Or, perhaps he hadn’t been as bad as he had thought.

Suddenly, a large gust of wind blew, and Tino felt the pictures in his hand fly from his grasp. His heart nearly dropped out of his chest.

And by what felt like divine intervention, they were caught by Ivan. His hand was high in the air, fingers clutching to them as he brought his arm back down. He stared at the photos, his eyes filled with such intensity that it made Tino’s body shudder in nervousness. They stopped in their tracks.

“Tino,” Ivan said in an unreadable tone, “who is this?”

He gave him a confused look. “...In the photos? That’s my grandfather.”

He seemed to be taking a peculiar interest in them, like he recognized him in some way but didn’t quite know how to articulate it. He brought it close to his face, studying every line and detail until Tino was sure that it was imprinted in his mind.

“What was his name?”

“His name?” Tino asked. “Zima Korhonen, why do you ask?”

Ivan glanced at him, before looking back to the picture. His eyes seemed to blaze with a burning realization, something that made Tino feel uneasy. He kept looking down to the photo before glancing back down to meet his eyes. His lips remained in a tight line.

“...Is something wrong?” Tino asked him.

Ivan opened his mouth to say something before promptly closing it again, like he was unsure how to phrase the words. “...Tino,” he began to say, his voice teetering in his caution. “Did he fight in the winter war?”

Tino nodded slowly, glancing between the photos in Ivan’s hands and the man himself. He supposed that wasn’t something that would be hard to guess—a lot of Finns his age enlisted in the army.

“Did he have a code name?”

“Yes—”

Ivan’s posture shifted, leaning down and pulling Tino close. “Was it General Winter?”

A chill ran down Tino’s spine. “Yes.”

How the hell did he know all this? Did something happen during the war that Ivan would be able to recognize his grandfather? He certainly hoped not. They were just starting to get along, and it would be a shame if the two of them were on bad terms again because of something his grandfather did.

"We are related."

Tino was only able to jolt in his surprise, instinctively holding Hana close to him as he looked up to meet the eyes of the man towering over him. Two pairs of lilac connected with each other.

"Related?" Tino began to sputter, "*Us*? What makes you say that?" That was ridiculous. He and Ivan couldn't be *related*. Ivan was Russian! No one in his family had ever even been to Russia!

Well...except for...

"This man," Ivan began, "When he was in Russia during the war, he met my grandmother—he had *a* child with her."

"A child?" Tino repeated breathlessly, the words passing through his mind in pure shock and disbelief.

"Yes, my mother. He swore he would return. He did not." His story...he seemed to know it so well, like it was something that he'd heard repeated over and over by members of his family—something he'd never hear the end of until he, like he said he did, cut them off. "She carried his picture with her, telling me that he would come back and take her away."

But would his grandfather really do something like that? Would he *really* impregnate a woman and leave her all by herself, making promises to return that he'd never fulfill. If he'd been asked if he thought that his grandfather was even *capable* of doing something like that yesterday, he would've laughed, saying that something like that was completely ridiculous.

Now he wasn't so sure.

Because his father had never liked him. They'd never gotten along. He'd always said he was a bad influence, and had done unforgivable things he'd never tell of...

It was certainly possible.

"It is the truth." Ivan only looked ahead.

Tino wasn't sure *what* he believed anymore.

"We are cousins."

"Cousins..." Tino repeated.

He didn't reply. Maybe, he wasn't so alone after all. He took the pictures from Ivan and shoved them back in his pocket, not caring about how crumpled they'd become.

Hana barked in Tino's arms, wagging her tail happily, like the revelation was something she had known all along. Maybe that was one of the reasons Hana latched onto him so quickly.

They walked together for a little longer, down twisting streets as the wind whipped at them. The cold burned at Tino's fingertips, making him shiver and shake. Ivan was there to protect him from some of the harshness at least, shielding him from the worst of the blowing cold. When they finally made it to

the outside of Tino's house, Ivan was there to reassure him. He handed him back his scarf, which he promptly tied back around his neck.

"Should you not be welcome, you may find shelter with Yao and I."

He knew he probably wouldn't need it, but it felt nice to hear the words. He was so kind and reassuring, just wanting to make sure that he had somewhere to rest his head.

"Thanks, Ivan," he said, "You're a good friend."

"...Friend?" Ivan repeated, almost like he could hardly believe he was saying those words.

"Yes," Tino said, "friend."

Hana barked happily in Tino's arms in affirmation of his statement, wagging her tail and squirming excitedly.

Tino turned back towards the house before locking his gaze with Ivan again. Lilac eyes, perhaps tied together by blood. Could it be that they were inseparable—forever bonded from this point forward? There, at the very least, would be no more hatred, only the embrace of the family they chose to keep close.

"Thank you, Ivan," Tino breathed.

"You're welcome, товарищ."

Tino took a step forward, leaving the warmth and safety of Ivan's presence as he walked to the front step. The cold assaulted him from every side, biting at his ears and scratching and pricking his skin. He kept going, no matter how much it hurt. He wanted to be back inside that house, to come home and for it to all be okay.

He'd say he was sorry, for everything. He'd apologize and only hope that it would be enough to make it up to Henrik. He'd tell him how much he loved him, and that he'd made a mistake while he was upset and that he didn't mean it. He made it to the front step, green Christmas lights glowing all around him as his knuckle fell against the door.

He chewed his lip, brought his hand back to clutch at the cross around his neck, ran his hand through Hana's fur, he did every action he could, desperate to relieve his anxiety. He needed for everything to be okay. Glancing behind him, he saw Ivan, who gave him a small nod of encouragement. Finally, the door swung open.

It was Henrik who had answered it, looking down at him with a quiet, neutral expression. He said nothing.

"Henrik, I'm sorry, I was being shitty. I shouldn't have—" he didn't get the chance to finish his apology. He was suddenly engulfed into a loving embrace, with warm and gentle hands wrapping around his body and throwing his father's jacket over him. He melted into it, feeling Hana leap down from his arms as the two of them pulled each other closer. Tino couldn't let go of him, once again feeling tears form in the corners of his eyes as they pulled away. He put his freezing hands on his cheeks, which was something Henrik didn't seem to care about in the slightest. The lights around them blinked green for a final time before turning off and dying, letting the outside succumb to the darkness of the night. He just looked...so happy, so relieved, like he was probably thanking the gods he didn't even believe in that he was home safe and sound.

“Come inside, hjärtanskär, it’s freezing.”

Tino held him close and turned his head. Desperate for his warmth and for his love. But when he looked out to the driveway, he saw that Ivan had already gone. With Hana happily barking at their feet, and Henrik’s gentle encouragement, he walked back inside the house, breathing out a sigh of relief at its warmth.

Chapter 22

Chapter Notes



“I’m sorry for what I said,” Tino said to Henrik. “I shouldn’t have done that.”

“It’s okay.” His boyfriend replied, squeezing him a bit, “...Just glad you’re back.”

Tino was still chattering from the cold outside, but Henrik’s body heat was helping to warm him up. They held each other in the doorway for a moment, as Hana pawed at their feet. Their embrace was interrupted however, when Eduard practically sprinted to Tino’s side. He’d come from upstairs, and hugged him so tightly he could hardly breathe.

“Ah! Eduard,” Tino squeaked, his voice strained as he wrapped his arms around his friend.

“Don’t ever do that again!” Eduard exclaimed, burying his face in his shoulder. “You scared me half to death! I went out looking for you and I couldn’t find you and—” he didn’t bother to continue his words, only hugging him tighter. His hair was sparkling much less intensely than it usually did, and his teal blue eyes were glued shut as he held him.

“...Sorry,” Tino said quietly.

“No—please, it’s fine,” he stuttered, “I’m just happy you’re okay.”

Henrik rubbed Tino’s lower back, obviously sensing how distressed he was. Doubtlessly, Eduard did too and he pulled away, loosening his arms and taking a small step back.

“Why don’t you go to your room? It’s late, and a lot has happened.” He rubbed his palms against Tino’s shoulders in reassurance.

“But what about everyone—”

“Don’t worry about it,” Eduard said gently, “I’ll deal with them. I told them to wait upstairs—just in case. We were all in Tolys’ room waiting for you to come back, you see?”

Tino looked down to the floor, but Eduard picked his chin up, looking at him softly. “Just get some rest. It’s been a long night, and you need sleep.”

...In all honesty, Tino couldn’t have agreed more. And it seemed Hana did too, as she barked her approval. He had hardly noticed how tired he was until Eduard pointed it out. His posture was slumped, and his eyes were heavy, but it just didn’t quite occur to him. Perhaps it was all the adrenaline and anxiety running through his system...

“...Okay.” Tino said quietly.

Eduard hugged him again, and turned. “Sleep well okay? We care about you a lot, you know.” He went up the stairs and disappeared.

Tino pulled his father’s jacket tighter around him, the cold from before slowly leaving him as he leaned against Henrik’s warm body. He said nothing, only allowing the exhaustion to overtake him. Henrik wrapped his arms around him, it wasn’t tight—seeming to be more of a reminder that he was there for him rather than a need to keep him in place. They didn’t move from their position against the door, with Henrik’s arms only moving up to hold him around the shoulders as his chin rested on top of Tino’s head. He seemed to have a lot on his mind—things he wouldn’t dare speak of and things Tino had no knowledge of. He wouldn’t push him, only daring to listen to the steady heartbeat that he felt from Henrik’s chest. Hana wagged her tail at their feet, looking up at them with warm brown eyes.

Henrik held him tighter.

“Sorry,” he said.

“What?” Tino asked, turning in his arms to look at Henrik. “What for?”

“For holdin’ the cigarettes like that. Wasn’t helpful—for either of us.” He had such a guilty expression on his face—like he somehow thought that the whole ordeal could’ve been prevented if only he’d not done that simple action. Obviously, that wasn’t true, and while it had been a little demeaning—he didn’t hold it against him. It was a pretty dumb thing to do, but he’d been trying to help. Even if it wasn’t quite in the right way, his intentions were good, and that’s what mattered. And hopefully, those cigarettes wouldn’t be a problem anymore.

“It’s okay,” Tino said gently, “I understand why you did it.”

The two of them were quiet, with only their breaths falling between them. Neither wanted to move, appreciating each other’s embrace too much. Still, Tino felt guilty. He’d caused so much pain—so much unnecessary hurt and anguish. He should’ve contained himself more—been less reactive and calmed down. He’d stressed everyone else around him out. He didn’t want to be the cause of this kind of event. He didn’t want to cause others to worry about him. But he had. And there was no taking that back.

“...I can sleep on the couch tonight,” he said. “So you can have your own space.”

Henrik scoffed loudly, showing his intense disapproval. “It’s *your* room,” he said.

“It *may* have been mine in the beginning but it’s *ours* now.” Tino replied, “If you want space then I’ll give it to you!”

Henrik shook his head. “I want the opposite,” he said, holding onto Tino a bit tighter.

“Oh,” Tino mumbled, feeling flustered that he’d asked.

With that, the two of them stumbled up to their room, long exhausted from such a terrible night. They hardly bothered to change, with Tino simply throwing off all the leather he was wearing and collapsing into bed. Henrik on the other hand changed into a pair of gray sweatpants. The second they had laid down together, they were in each other’s arms. Tino rested his head on Henrik’s chest, whose arm was gently wrapped around Tino’s shoulder. Hana jumped up to join them in their bed, curling up on Henrik’s stomach and falling asleep. Tino appreciated it all greatly. Because he was sure that there had only been a couple of times in his life that he’d been this cold. It was nice to feel their warmth, showing him how much they both loved him and how much they cared. He loved the feeling of Henrik’s hands on him, reminding him of how much he loved him. Those hands, that were so hard and calloused, which would touch him so softly and gently.

But he didn’t have time to mull over such things, as his eyes were heavy and desperate for sleep. He ran his hand through Henrik’s hair, sitting up slightly so he could kiss his head before settling back down.

“Goodnight,” Tino whispered, “I love you.”

“...Love you too, hjärtanskär.” Henrik said. His voice was small and quiet—so much so that Tino hardly heard him at all. Still though, he understood his message and closed his eyes, falling into a deep sleep.

Usually, he didn't dream.

But tonight he did.

It was of an empty room. There were white walls that towered above him so high that the ceiling wasn't visible. There was only one door, and so, he did what any logical person would do, and opened it.

There was a bright flash of light.

His body adjusted to the new setting before his eyes did, as he brought his hands to rub against his arms. He felt cold, but not cold enough to make his teeth chatter. It was an uncomfortable kind of cold, that would only serve to make him feel slightly inconvenienced. When he opened his eyes, he immediately recognized it—concrete floors with red pillars holding up the second floor. There were golden poles with holes where they came down, and of course, the unmistakable red fire trucks of the station. A bell rang in the building, and suddenly the sound of footsteps were heard. Tino turned to face it. A group of firefighters began to descend from the poles, all patting and rubbing his head. Their faces were blurred and unclear, and Tino couldn't really tell *who* exactly they were supposed to be.

"Nice to see ya, kid," said one.

"Gonna come with us again this time?" asked another as he walked by.

They both spoke in Finnish, with rough accents that felt only somewhat familiar.

So many walked past him—a sea of brown jackets with yellow reflectors. He couldn't see over their heads—which wasn't exactly unusual for him because of his shorter stature, however he felt...smaller than usual. He looked down at himself.

It wasn't that he *felt* smaller.

He *was* smaller.

He took another step back examining himself. He didn't know how old he was—perhaps 12 or 13? He couldn't be sure. Still though, the swarm of firefighters kept coming, surrounding him and patting his head until suddenly, they were gone and only one stood in front of him.

He was taller than the others were, and his head was down. He couldn't see his features, but he too was wearing a brown jacket with yellow reflectors around the sides.

"Tino," the voice said.

It was familiar in a way that Tino thought he'd never hear again—in a way that all of time and space bent for, in order to accommodate for a thing he'd always wished he could listen to just once more.

"...Dad?"

The man before him took another step forward before quickening into a sprint, coming close and wrapping Tino in a hard and tight embrace.

“Dad!” Tino exclaimed. “Dad, it’s really you!” He squeezed him back with all he could—knowing that he’d probably never get this chance again. He smelled just the same as he always had—like he was fresh out of the sauna that the two of them had always used together. Tino pulled away, looking into his father’s eyes. They were lilac—just like his, and his hair was the same straw blond, save for a few gray spots. He looked fairly young, with few wrinkles on his face with the exception of the small lines around his eyes that he probably got from smiling too much.

“My son,” his father laughed gently, holding his shoulders as he pulled him close. “My sweet, Nassikka.”

“God—Dad—I’ve missed you so much,” he began to say, burying his head in his chest.

“Me too,” he replied.

“God—so much has happened—” he staggered as he looked back up. “Uh—I moved to America for college, I’m studying to be a teacher—uh—”

His father only laughed. “Aren’t you spirited? You’ll be retired by the time you’re 18.”

“What?” Tino asked, before remembering how young he looked. “Oh—uh, yeah! That’s right!”

“You’re just like me, you know that, Nassikka? When I was your age I was always looking for the next challenge to conquer, just like my dad before me. You have that Väinämöinen spirit in you!” He chuckled to himself, seeming to reminisce for a moment before he continued. “But, enough of that. I wanted to bring you some stuff.” His father smiled again, his eyes creasing in the same way that Tino’s did. “I’ve had them for a long time now, and I think it’s time that I pass them down to you.”

Tino blinked—only waiting as his father lowered himself to him. Tino could only wonder what he was doing—watching him take off his jacket and fiddle with something around his neck. He put the coat around Tino’s shoulders, and took his hand, instructing him to turn as he felt icy-cool metal hit his skin. He heard a click, and a laugh, and he once again turned, looking down at the necklace that had been clasped around his neck.

It was silver, with a four sided badge charm, and a picture of a roman soldier. He held it to his chest, and he soon felt his father put his hands on top of his own.

“I’m proud of you,” he said. “And I think it’s time I passed some of my old gear to you. I think you’re ready to start your training.” Tino immediately felt the immense feeling of warmth overtake his body as he clutched the necklace in his little fist—holding it tightly as he launched himself into a hug with the man he admired so much.

“Really?!” he asked, squeezing him tightly.

He laughed. “Yes, Tino, I am.”

“Even after everything? After all the stupid mistakes I made and all the shitty things I’ve said.”

“Of course I do,” he replied, patting his back. “But really, where did you learn to swear like that?” Tino ignored him, only squeezed him tighter. He could feel his father’s grip getting looser.

Somehow, he felt like his time was running out.

“I found love, Dad! I met a great guy! He’s quiet and gentle and loves me so much. He’s got a soft heart and he loves to sew and embroider and do woodworking. He’s great—he’s everything I could’ve

asked for!” Tino looked up

“That’s great, Nassikka,” His father replied, “But aren’t you a bit young to be dating? I’m sure he’s a good kid and all if you like him so much.”

“You think so?” Tino asked, feeling a bit flustered.

His father nodded. “I trust you,” he said with a laugh. “He’s your first love right?”

Tino nodded.

“That’s what I thought,” his father said. “There’s nothing sweeter than two young lovers.”

Tino’s grip felt looser, and somehow he knew that he only had a short time left. He couldn’t bring himself to say anything more, feeling his father’s arms become lighter and lighter around him.

He didn’t dare let go.

“I know it’s hard,” he father said, “You’ll feel isolated for a while. But remember that there are, and will always be people who care about you.”

He felt a kiss land on the top of his head, which was so light it was like he was hardly there at all.

“I love you!” Tino shouted, looking up to the fading image of his father. “I love you so much!”

He laughed.

“I love you too, Tino.”

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Tino woke up in a cold sweat, launching upright as he clutched the cross around his neck.

He couldn’t quite process what he had just experienced. His breaths were fast and panting as his eyes adjusted to the darkness. He could hardly see a thing, but still he felt the adrenaline pumping through his veins as he leapt from his bed, rushing over to his dresser and feeling along it’s surface. He found what he was looking for almost instantly, his fingers stinging slightly at the cold as he picked up the necklace that lay there. Tino felt a shiver run up his spine, clasping the metal around his neck, letting the subtle warmth of his cross necklace leave him as he took it off and replaced it.

He didn’t need it anymore.

Not when he had something so much better.

The necklace of St. Florian. The one that his father had given him many years ago. The one with Finnish words so lovingly placed into the metal; words that meant “protect us”.

He hadn’t worn it in a long time—he’d been too afraid of getting it dirty, but there was no reason to worry about that now. That dream felt like a sign. Why should he worry about such a trivial thing? He was not a burden on his father’s legacy, and he would wear his gifts with pride. He put his old cross necklace down gently on the dresser. His eyes had adjusted by now, able to see as well as anyone

really could in the pitch blackness. He breathed a sigh of relief, his chest feeling as light as it had been in years.

Tino stood there for a while, clutching the charm in his hand before he breathed out again. It felt like a weight that he'd been carrying for his entire life had simply gone and rolled off his shoulders.

He rubbed his eyes and yawned, blinking a couple of times before he turned around to go back to bed again. He hoped he hadn't woken Henrik up with all of his rummaging around, he was such a light sleeper after all...

But his boyfriend was sitting up, the covers tossed away as his knees hung over the bed. His body was turned away from him, but his face was angled over his shoulder, peering at him through the darkness. It looked like Hana was sitting on his lap. Though he was covered in shadow, Tino could tell that he wasn't wearing his glasses. It struck Tino as extremely odd, because he knew his boyfriend couldn't see a thing without them.

"Oh! I'm sorry," Tino apologized immediately, going over to him, "I woke you up didn't I? I'm sorry—please, go back to sleep." He moved back into his own place on the bed, lightly placing his hands on Henrik's shoulders.

But his boyfriend didn't greet him with that deep, low voice he had come to expect from him. Instead it was higher, quavering, and shaky.

"No," he said. "You didn't."

"Huh?" Tino replied, concern shooting through him as he pulled himself closer. Henrik blinked a couple of times, though his eyes remained on Tino. They were puffy, glossy, and red. He was crying.

"Are you okay?!" Tino exclaimed, feeling the adrenaline shoot through his body again. He knew he probably shouldn't have shouted, but he was so caught off guard he couldn't stop himself. Henrik never cried. At least not in front of him. He quickly reached over to their bedside, clicking on the lamp and letting the light flood the room.

Henrik rapidly moved his arm up over his eyes, making a desperate attempt to wipe them clean, in a move which Tino thought might be to stop him from seeing. His mouth was carved into a deep frown, and his cheeks were filled with the lines of many tears that had already fallen.

"Henrik?" Tino said gently, moving his hand to rub against his back. "What's wrong?"

"...I don't know."

"You don't?"

He cleared his throat and he wiped his eyes as Hana jumped out of his lap and onto the floor, sneaking underneath the bed. "I was just," he started to say before sniffing again, "I was afraid of losin' you."

Tino moved closer, wrapping him in an embrace before pulling away and looking him in the eyes. "I'm not going anywhere," he said with firmness. "I love you too much for that."

"...I know."

They were quiet for a moment.

"I don't want to go back to how it was," he said weakly. "I finally feel happy."

“You weren’t happy?” Tino asked, his heart panging in his chest.

“No.”

It was quiet again.

“With Mathias I was a burden,” he sniffled. “Always have been.”

“You’re not a burden!” Tino interjected strongly, hardly believing he could ever think such a thing.

“I was,” he responded. “Was my fault he couldn’t live with Lukas...everything was my fault.” He buried his head in Tino’s shoulder, holding him for support as the words left his lips. They sounded so deeply pained, like it was something that had been bothering him for years that he was finally allowing himself to say out loud.

“Don’t say that! You can’t blame yourself for everything!”

Henrik stopped for a moment. “...There’s a reason I don’t like being at Lukas’ house,” he said. Tino rubbed his back, and he continued. “...I made a mistake there, a mistake that I’ve regretted every day. Nearly ruined my friendship with my only friends.”

“Your only friends?” Tino questioned. “You have more than that—at least nowadays!”

“I don’t,” he said bitterly. “You, Lukas, Emil, and Mathias are all I got... Wouldn’t even have anyone at all if not for him.”

“Who?” Tino asked. “Mathias?”

“Mm. He’s the only reason I have friends at all.”

“What?”

“Every friend I’ve ever had was because of him. Introduced me to Emil and Lukas in high school, and...you know...met you through him.”

“Well, yeah,” Tino said gently, “but that’s not a bad thing.”

“It is,” Henrik argued, bringing his head out of Tino’s shoulder and rubbing his teary eyes. “Wouldn’t have anyone if it wasn’t for him.”

Tino furrowed his eyebrows. “That’s not true,” he said, “you know that.”

“Feels like it is,” he said sadly.

“Then what about our roommates?” Tino suggested, “You didn’t need Mathias to meet them. They’re your friends, and they care about you a lot—just like I do.”

“...Friends?” Henrik repeated, sniffing like he hadn’t even considered that. “...You think so?”

“Yes! Of course!” Tino shouted before quickly lowering his tone, “We’re all your friends Henrik, we love you.”

Large tears rolled out of his eyes as he pulled Tino closer once again, sobbing into it as Tino hushed him, rubbing his back as he cried.

“You’re okay, Henrik,” he said soothingly, kissing the side of his head.

Hana whined from underneath their bed and leapt up into Henrik’s lap, whimpering as she saw how upset he was. They stayed like that for a long while, until the tears ran dry and it seemed like he couldn’t produce any more. Tino held him tightly the entire time, rubbing his back and showing that he was there for him. It was such a simple action, but something told Tino that he appreciated it more than he could vocalize.

“All better?” Tino asked quietly.

“Think so,” he choked out.

Hana wiggled in his lap and leapt back down on the bed, and they moved to lay back down. Henrik went back to his usual position, with his cheek resting on Tino’s chest. Hana, in turn, settled down on his stomach. He was about to wish the two of them goodnight and remove Henrik’s glasses from his face when his boyfriend spoke again.

“Tino,” he said, with such softness it was almost a whisper, “I need to say somethin’.”

He only blinked in response, bringing his hand to run through Henrik’s hair as he continued to speak.

“...You’re my first love,” he said.

Tino snickered out a laugh. “Mine too.”

Henrik seemed to dislike that. He moved to sit up, turning around to face him as he spoke. Tino joined him, and Hana jumped into his lap as he patted her lightly. “But...” he began to say, flushing slightly in embarrassment, “you weren’t my first kiss or...um...”

Tino only blinked at him—confused as to why he was admitting such a thing to him. He knew his own history. Was he expecting him to say the same? Tino could only stare at him—utterly baffled by the topic.

Henrik shook his head attempting to dismiss his confusion. “It was Lukas,” he said.

Lukas...

Lukas who was Mathias’ boyfriend. Lukas who was a former smoker and had been able to recover. Lukas who had *also* used his body as a means for temporary satisfaction—as a way to cope with things that were far larger than themselves. Lukas who was better than that now, and had his own family to prove it. Lukas who was everything Tino wished he could be.

Shamefully, Tino felt a bit of jealousy rise up in his heart that he knew shouldn’t be there. Henrik loved him now unabashedly, there was no question to it. But in a competition between him and Lukas...he would lose every time.

“Oh,” Tino managed to squeak out. Hana wiggled uncomfortably in his arms.

Henrik jolted, seeming to sense the weakness in him as he grasped his hands looking him fiercely in the eyes. “I didn’t love him,” he said, “not in that way. I’ve only ever felt that love for you.”

Tino blushed madly as that jealousy immediately left him—his face turning red at the declaration. Their fingers tightened around each other’s as Henrik continued to speak.

“...I made a mistake. One I regret more than anything. He and Mathias had broken up. We got drunk together. I was a rebound,” he said matter of factly. “...It’s not something I should’ve done. Nearly ruined my life.” He looked extremely pained, with his eyes flicking to the floor sadly before he continued. “...Was lucky Mathias forgave me at all. He was upset for a long time.”

“I see,” Tino said.

Henrik squeezed Tino’s hands tighter. “I just...needed you to know,” he said. “Wouldn’t feel right if I didn’t tell you.” Tino nodded his head, and Hana settled back down, laying her head on his knees. “...Didn’t really feel anything before I met you,” he said quietly. “I thought I was broken.”

“What? Broken?” Tino repeated, astonished that he’d even think of such a thing. “Henrik, you know that’s not true right?”

“Mm, I do now,” he nodded. “But I never felt that kind of love before. Never got a crush...not until I met you.” He broke one his hands away from Tino’s and rubbed the back of his neck, blushing. “Nothin’ felt...satisfying either—Not like with you.” He awkwardly cleared his throat.

Tino thought it best to not ask him to elaborate on that front, as he too began to blush. But did he really think that he was *broken*? That was such a horrible word. To imply that he wasn’t working properly and that he needed to be *fixed*. So what if he hadn’t felt that kind of love before—that didn’t mean there was something wrong with him! Plenty of people were like that!

“You aren’t broken,” Tino said firmly. “You weren’t then and you aren’t now.” Henrik opened his mouth to speak but Tino interrupted him. “Eduard’s like that, you know. He’s never been interested in relationships—not in the slightest. Love like that always made him uncomfortable—at least when it came to having it for himself. That doesn’t mean he’s broken. It’s perfectly okay!”

Henrik’s expression changed—to one that Tino himself couldn’t even read. Hana barked softly and leapt out of Tino’s lap, slipping away to sit underneath the bed.

“You mean,” he mumbled quietly, “...That’s normal?”

“Yeah!” Tino replied. “There’s tons of people like that! Not just you and Eduard!”

“Oh,” he said thoughtfully. Like he’d never considered that possibility before. He linked his hand back with Tino’s, squeezing him tightly. “...Love you now though.”

“I know,” Tino snickered, leaning forward and kissing his cheek. “I love you too, kulta.”

And for the first time that night, he smiled, his eyes softening as he leaned forward and kissed the top of his head. There was a certain, unnamable happiness that ran through him, one that he felt impossible to describe. Henrik held him close, thankful that he could even touch him at all. They kissed, in a passionate way that the two of them reserved only for each other. There was no more fighting, and there were no more tears. Instead, there was only the joy that emanated from being in his presence. He was happy, not out of spite for what he had lost, but out of love and unity. Tino could feel the smile on Henrik’s lips, something that had been rare but now was relatively common. They pulled each other closer, until they both had to break apart to gasp for breath. They laughed as they leaned in for another kiss, and another, and another. Henrik cupped Tino’s cheek with his hand, looking at him with kind-hearted devotion.

“Can we?” he asked, sounding more confident than he’d probably ever been when posing such a question. He moved his hands to sit on Tino’s waist.

“Yes please,” Tino replied, chuckling. “I’d love to.”

They kissed again, happy and free to do as they pleased. And they surrendered themselves, not to the night, but to each other.

“Here, can you take this?” Tino asked, taking the gun down from above their bed. After a long morning of sleeping in, he decided that he wanted to...clean out their room. Most of the photos that he’d had displayed were now packed away in a box—which was where his grandfather’s gun was going to go too. He’d expressed that he had no idea what he was going to do with it all...so storage really was the best option.

“Um—yeah,” Henrik mumbled.

Tino held the thing with such...normalcy, like it was something he had done many times before. On the other hand, Henrik had never even thought about holding such a thing. It felt foreign in his hands, and he quickly discarded it into the box at his feet. Watching Tino discard photos and momentos made his heart ache. These were people he’d cared about, people that he’d grown up with and had raised him, and now he was putting all that aside. They had hurt him—and Tino was determined to stop them from doing that again.

At least...that’s what he had said.

The only picture that remained was the one of his father, which never moved from its place next to the rosary, and his old cross necklace on the dresser.

“Okay, that’s everything!” Tino said with a smile, sitting down on their bed. He wiped his brow with his forearm, sighing a little as he looked over the room. “It looks kind of...” he paused, as if he was trying to remember something. “...Um...what was that word?” He fidgeted with his hands as he tried to remember. “Uh...Oh! Delsolate!” he exclaimed, pronouncing it wrong. “That’s it!”

“*Desolate*.” Henrik corrected.

“Yeah! That!” He snickered a little and shook his head before changing the subject. “We should find some things to make our shelves more full—don’t you think?”

“Hm,” Henrik hummed.

Tino suddenly gasped, “Oh! I know! We could put in some more book shelves! Those would be nice!”

And to his own surprise, Henrik found himself agreeing.

“Mm, that’d be...cute.”

“And we could build them together! Wouldn’t that be fun?” Tino smiled enthusiastically, laying down on his back and putting his hands behind his head. “I know you’ve been wanting to build some new furniture.”

Henrik blushed at the detail, slightly embarrassed that he remembered. “Mm,” he said again.

Tino breathed in a deep breath, closing his eyes as he sighed it out. “It feels good,” he said.

He didn't wait for Henrik's interjection (probably knowing that there wouldn't be one) as he continued to speak. "I just...feel so free—like this burden's been lifted off my shoulders! It's so nice! I never thought I *could* feel this way!"

Henrik had felt like that once. When he too had cut himself off. He'd felt like there was nothing holding him back, as he and Mathias vanished into the wind. But that didn't last. He hadn't realized how much he would miss them. Because once he was living with Mathias, he found out what it was like to be truly alone. He'd never considered himself to be particularly lonely before, but there was something about Mathias that made him impossible to ignore. He was too happy-go-lucky, and loud, and he had such a charming swagger about him that it was impossible *not* to notice him. And yet, for a reason that still evaded Henrik's understanding, he chose to stay by him and be his friend.

His first friend.

Of course he had to learn to share him when Lukas and Emil came into the picture, which was certainly...an *adjustment*. Still though, nothing could've prepared him for what it was like when he went off to stay with them. Times when their apartment was just quiet. When he'd wake up and just feel alone. Mathias always had such a presence—so when he was gone, it was like the whole world went silent. It was days like that when he wished he could have what Mathias did. Where he'd get jealous for everything that he had that Henrik didn't. That ability to meet people and make friends, his loveable personality, the way he was able to get *Lukas* to fall in love with him. Lukas who was aloof and blasé in practically everything he did.

He was just that charming, Henrik supposed.

He wasn't jealous because he was in love with him, rather it was that he knew that it was something he'd never have. He knew that even if he did feel that romantic love that he wished so much for, that no one would ever *want* to share that with him. He was too intimidating—too scary to make a good partner.

He at least had Emil at that time. When he was lonely he could remember that there was at least a little kid who looked up to him. He was younger then—maybe 12 or 13. It was nice to have him around. Because Emil didn't remind him of all the things that made his heart ache with sadness, instead he would remind him of how much he loved children. It was probably because of him that he wanted to be a father so much. There were few things that really kept him happy in years like those, but one of them was the promise that he had made to himself. He wanted to have a kid, even if he didn't have a parent to share them with.

And then one train of thought led to another and he was thinking about his parents again. Those people that had raised him, and tried their best to make him happy—and he was...at least in Sweden. How could they have known how sad he would be in America? He had been young and immature—ungrateful even. Because as hard as his life here had been, he didn't blame them for taking an incredible opportunity.

And there was something about seeing all of those boxes in their room that made his heart sink. Because Tino was given a different set of cards. He was given a family who loved and cared for him, but, at least in his opinion, only wanted to make sure he was presentable on the outside. They wanted him to settle down and have kids—not because it was something *he* wanted, but because it would look good for *them*. And the only person who wasn't like that had died all too recently.

Tino wasn't some bratty teenager like Henrik was, making impulsive choices just for the hell of it—rather he was forced away from people he thought cared. Because even if he and Tino weren't meant

to be together (as much as it hurt his heart to think of such a thing), they would surely chastise him for his next choice in partner. He was gay, and his family would never accept that.

Tino had an actual, legitimate reason he'd been separated from his family.

And Henrik did not.

"Hey! Kulta!" Tino called, now sitting up on their bed. "Is everything alright? You look a bit..." he paused as he was probably trying to remember the phrase, "...lost in space?"

Henrik blinked for a moment, briefly glancing at his telescope before settling his eyes on his boyfriend again. He had a worried expression, but looked as if he was trying to hide it.

"Nothin'."

"Come on, I know that face," Tino scolded, "I know something's bothering you."

Henrik blushed and put a hand to his cheek, hardly even realizing that he had been emoting at all.

"You can tell me," Tino said as he stood up from the bed. He moved towards him and extended his hands for Henrik to hold them. "Is this about the other night? You know I care about you, right?"

"Yes," Henrik mumbled, planting a small kiss on the top of his head.

"So can you tell me what's wrong?"

"...Was just thinkin' about my parents," he sighed.

"What about them?"

Henrik had to pause, trying to think of the words. "...I feel kinda selfish."

"Selfish?" Tino repeated.

"And guilty, 'cause of what happened to you. *I was bein'...*" A cacophony of words filled his mind.

Stupid.

Irresponsible.

Childish.

"Immature," he decided to say.

Tino was silent for a moment, clutching his hands.

"You said you don't talk to them anymore—right?"

"Mm."

"Well, have you ever considered changing that? You could call them—let them know how you're doing."

If it hadn't been Tino suggesting it, he would've scoffed. Instead he only shook his head. It had been too long for that. Just a phone call? He couldn't do that to them. And what would he say? He wasn't

much good with words, Tino knew that better than anyone. Still though, he was trying. He wanted to reconnect, to tell them he was sorry and that he loved them. Because he did.

He just didn't know how to start.

"Well, do you want to visit them then?" Tino asked, sensing his hesitancy. "Maybe that would be helpful—I know you're not the most talkative, and I'm sure they'd appreciate the visit."

Damn him.

But...honestly, what did he have to lose? He *did* want to reconnect. He wanted them in his life, to show them how far he's come; To show them that he was actually happy now and that he had a boyfriend who loved him (Not to mention the dog they'd adopted together). And...it really would be nice to have Tino there, to support him.

Henrik shifted his weight—obviously unsure. It was a pretty big step. He liked stability, and something like this, it was too spontaneous for him. Just suddenly showing up at their house. He liked to be firm in his footing, but this felt like he was hopping off a cliff without knowing how far he'd fall.

"And if things go badly we could come back here and play minecraft!" Tino said, flashing an irresistible smile.

"Sounds good," Henrik said. "Let's go."

Tino kissed his cheek encouragingly. He stepped away for a moment, going to his closet and taking out his motorcycle helmet before taking his hand again and leading them downstairs. He'd been itching to go out for a ride on that thing—so leave it to him to choose it for *this* trip. Still though, Henrik didn't mind too much. There was something about the wind whipping at his face that really cleared his mind. And if he was *actually* going to be doing something like this, he'd definitely need it.

They descended the stairs together, eyes flicking past their roommates, who were playing a board game with Feliks. Tolys had Hana in his lap, petting her as she yipped to them.

"Going somewhere?" Eduard teased.

"Mm," Henrik grunted.

"Have fun!" Tolys smiled gently, like he himself was their father—wishing them to be safe on their journey.

"We will," Tino replied.

Raivis didn't say anything, only staring at them with those captivating cerulean eyes. He looked...satisfied, that everything had resolved between them and that there was nothing to fight about anymore. Henrik appreciated that more than he knew.

Tino finished putting on his shoes before Henrik did—sliding his helmet on and saying that he'd meet him outside. As soon as he was gone, Feliks spoke.

"...See you soon, Ricky," he said shyly.

Henrik felt himself smile as he waved to him. "See you soon."

He turned and left the house, meeting Tino in the driveway.

He was enthusiastically messing with a few things on his bike—clearly excited for their upcoming trip in more than a few ways. When Henrik made it to Tino’s side, he took one of his arms and rolled down the hitched-up sleeves.

“We have to stay safe!” he cheered, pushing up the visor of the skeleton-devil-creature headgear.

“Mm, right.”

Henrik recited the address to Tino, who plugged it into his phone and secured it with a clip in front of him. He was sure he could feel his heart beating on his back as the two of them sat down together. Henrik wrapped his arms around his boyfriend’s waist, squeezing him more for his own comfort rather than needing to feel secure. It made Tino snicker a little from underneath his helmet, and he rubbed his leg in reassurance.

“Everything will turn out alright!” he said cheerfully, turning to face him. “Can’t be much worse than what happened to me!” To that end Henrik definitely agreed. He turned back around and flipped down his visor, revving the motorcycle a few times and taking off.

It had been a long time since he had felt his heart ache in such a way. It was almost comparable to the way he felt when he saw Tino for the first time...

He remembered it like it was yesterday.

“-and then the dog became a superhero and saved the day! It was incredible!” Mathias laughed, elbowing Lukas. He rolled his eyes, obviously not willing to humor him.

“I hated that movie,” he said.

“What?!” Mathias exclaimed, “But underdog could fly and everything!”

Lukas gave him a bemused look, probably baffled that he thought *that* was what he was taking issue with when the premise of the movie was that a beagle caused a fire so severe it modified its DNA and turned it into a superhero.

Henrik really couldn’t have cared less about their conversation. The three of them were outside at the University’s campus, sitting on a picnic blanket and enjoying the last few days of summer before autumn began. It was the beginning of their junior year, and classes were just now starting up. He really hadn’t been thinking of much, he couldn’t remember. Perhaps it was about the weather, or wondering what he would prepare for he and Mathias to eat that night, or about the upcoming classwork he’d been needing to do. It hardly mattered, because all those thoughts left him the second that beautiful blond haired man entered his sight line.

And 20 years worth of that love that he so longed for hit him all at once.

His heart began to pound viciously and mercilessly in his chest, assaulting him with affection as he stared. He felt his face heat up to the point where it was burning to the touch. He’d never felt something like that before, he was distressed by it—scared even as he put his hand over his chest. He blinked his eyes, feeling them start to water slightly as it all washed over him.

“It *works*,” he muttered under his breath.

What was this feeling?

Was this what he had been longing for?

Was this what Mathias felt, every day of his life when he saw Lukas?

He could hardly even believe he'd lived without it.

He couldn't take his eyes off of that man. Just who was he? Did he know him? He pushed his glasses up on his nose—desperate to get a better look. He had a tan jacket with neon reflectors—which was really big on him. The man was walking alone, obviously absorbed in something else as he stared ahead. Perhaps he was listening to music? He was bobbing his head a little, and the way he landed his steps was in perfect rhythm.

Henrik could only wonder what he was listening to, maybe he'd like it too.

“Ricky?! What’s wrong? Is everything okay?” Mathias asked, sounding somewhat alarmed.

“Uh—” he could hardly even stutter.

Mathias quickly scrambled over to him, wrapping his arms around his neck as he stared around, trying to find where he was looking.

“Holy shit! Who’s that you’re looking at?! Who is he?!” Mathias demanded.

“Dunno,” Henrik choked.

Lukas joined Henrik at his side, slinking over in a manner that reminded him of a sly little cat. He narrowed his eyes—as if he was trying to recognize him, but ultimately came up with nothing.

“Do you like him?!” Mathias asked excitedly, “You should go talk to him!”

Lukas snickered in teasing delight. “This’ll be fun,” He said.

“No!” Henrik exclaimed in a rare verbal outburst.

“C’mon! You gotta! Please! You have to! You have to! You have to!” Mathias begged.

“Stop!” Henrik exclaimed, flushing pink and hiding his face in embarrassment.

Mathias had bugged him like that long after Tino was out of sight. He bugged him about it all day, during class, when they were walking Lukas to his car, when they were going home to their own apartment, and etcetera.

It was the beginning of a new era—a turning point in his life. No longer would he long to have the kind of relationship that Lukas and Mathias did. Now, he was too busy fantasizing about that man, and dreaming about what their relationship could be like. That man whose name he didn’t even know.

He’d find out soon enough though.

“Alright,” Tino said, interrupting Henrik’s thoughts. He pulled his motorcycle up to an all-too-familiar driveway. “We’re here.”

His heart probably would’ve dropped out if it hadn’t been for Tino’s reassuring glance after he took his helmet off. He had to admit—it was certainly strange that he could be such a good motorcycle driver when he was so terrible at driving a car...

“We’re here,” Henrik repeated.

He looked over the house. It wasn’t much, a small place in the suburbs that he had grown up in. Nothing stood out about it really—from the soft brown exterior to the white picket fence in the garden...It was mundane, and unassuming. Still though, it towered over him, daunting in its presence. He hadn’t been to this place in years.

“...We don’t have to go in,” Tino suggested, sensing his discomfort. “I can take you back.”

“No,” Henrik said firmly. As much as his heart was pounding—this was the furthest he’d gotten in years. He couldn’t turn back now, not when he was so close. He brought his hand down to Tino’s and locked them together, taking him up to the front door.

He really *hoped* they wouldn’t mind his arrival. He had to wonder how they’d react to seeing him. Would they be upset? He *had* left them very suddenly. They hadn’t even gotten the chance to say goodbye. He’d understand if they didn’t want to speak to him.

Henrik stepped up to the porch, ducking his head under the overhang as he’d always had to do. The house was quaint, and delicate, like it was out of a fairytale. One that Henrik had always felt he didn’t belong in. It was all too sickeningly familiar, feeling queasy at just the thought of knocking at the door. Tino squeezed his hand, looking up at him with concern as he held his helmet at his hip.

“Remember what I promised,” he laughed dryly.

Henrik sucked in a deep breath, closed his eyes shut, and put his knuckle to the door. He knocked against the wood, holding Tino’s hand so tightly he could hardly believe that he wasn’t asking him to let go. His boyfriend understood though, and moved closer, leaning against his shoulder as they waited.

That was the worst part—the waiting. It was the uncertainty that killed him. He didn’t know what to expect, in the next few seconds he could be trudging down the steps after being viciously turned away. Knowing his own parents—they probably *wouldn’t* do that, but it was the possibility that scared him. He felt like he was free falling, unable to stabilize himself against the Earth he needed so much. The Earth which was firm, and still...

The door clicked, and Henrik and Tino immediately straightened.

It slammed open, revealing a woman with shoulder length blonde hair and sea green eyes—just like his own.

“Henke?!” she exclaimed. The word hit his ears like nothing else ever could. He let go of Tino, launching forward as he wrapped his arms around her, holding her tightly because he was unsure if she would disappear.

She reciprocated, burying her face in his shoulder.

“Where have you been?” she began to whimper in Swedish, hugging him tightly. “Your dad and I were so worried about you.”

“I know,” he replied. “I’m sorry.”

She loosened for a moment, staring up at him and taking in his features.

“...You’ve grown so much.”

Her voice wasn't bitter in its sadness, much more it was the sound of a woman who was regretful, like she had spent years asking what she could've done to prevent what happened. Of course, Henrik knew that wasn't fair.

"I'm sorry," he apologized again, knowing that it was all he could offer in reconciliation. "Shouldn't have left you both."

She didn't have anything to say to that, cupping his cheek in her palm as she looked up at him. "I love you," she said.

"Love you too, mom.."

She hugged him again. "Please, come inside, we can have lunch together—I'll make your favorite meatballs, just for you."

He felt himself chuckle slightly. "Okay."

His mother was about to drag him inside the house when she stopped, loosening on her grip to stare at the other man standing on their porch. Tino was just kind of...standing there, with a clueless expression on his face. Clearly, he hadn't retained *anything* from those Swedish classes he'd said he'd taken in school.

"Who's that?" she asked him.

Henrik blushed faintly.

"Tino," he said.

As soon as he heard his own name he brightened, smiling happily as he waved to her.

"Hi!" he exclaimed. Clearly, he wasn't sure how much had been said on the status of their relationship—so he stayed quiet about that part.

His mother looked to be a bit confused, but ultimately shrugged her shoulders. She ushered the two of them inside, past familiar family photos until they arrived in the living room. It was shocking how little had changed. There was that same old couch and coffee table, lined up against the back wall in front of an old TV that probably didn't even work anymore. His father was sitting at the table by the door—which Henrik knew led to the kitchen. He was playing a game of solitaire.

His hair was that same blond, with sea green eyes much like his own, though they were a bit dull in their color. He, unlike his mother, looked visibly older, the wrinkles on his face showing that he hadn't been smiling nearly as much as he did when he was a child. Who could really blame him though? Henrik certainly couldn't. His only son had left him without merely as much as a goodbye.

"Darling," his mother called in Swedish, beckoning his attention.

He sighed and put his cards down, glancing over to her with a sad sort of look in his eye.

"Yes, Anki?" It was so foreign to see him like that. He had always been so jovial and happy, smiling and laughing at the smallest of things.

"...Henke?" he mumbled, sounding incredulous.

"Dad," Henrik said.

“Henke!” he exclaimed. He ran over, his hand slipping and messing up his card game as he ran over. He threw him into an embrace so tight that Henrik had to take a step back to regain his balance. “Where have you been?! Has everything been okay?! Are you alright?!”

“Yes, everything’s been fine.” He rubbed his father’s back as he held him. “Lived with Mathias for a while; live with Tino now...and some others.”

Tino straightened at the hearing of his name, as he once again waved—this time to his father. “Hello!” His dad didn’t acknowledge him.

“...I’ve missed you, son.”

“...I know. I’m sorry.” Henrik said regretfully.

He hugged him for a while longer, and they were soon joined by his mother, all wrapping themselves together tightly as they had done all those years ago, when things were fine between them and there was no reason for Henrik to feel so unhappy. When they broke apart, Henrik noticed how awkward Tino looked, scratching the back of his neck as he was desperately trying to look like he belonged. Henrik could hardly blame him, they weren’t even speaking a language he understood.

He cleared his throat and put his hand on the side of Tino’s shoulder—careful to avoid the spikes on the shoulders of his jacket. This time he spoke in English, just to be sure that he understood what was happening around him.

“This is Tino,” he said again, “He is my boyfriend. We got a dog together. Wanted to introduce you to him.”

“Boyfriend?” His mom asked with a small, teasing smile, “Oh, you always told us so little.”

Henrik blushed, rubbing the back of his neck with his palm. “Sorry.”

But his mother only shook her head, her smile growing brighter as she looked over the two of them. “No,” she said sweetly, “You have nothing to apologize for.”

His father, on the other hand, extended his hand to Tino, who took it.

“Thank you for bringing our son back to us,” he said.

“What? Me?” Tino said with a flustered expression.

His mother laughed and nodded, looking him over briefly before closing her eyes and giggling. “He’s a good match for you,” she whispered in Swedish. “You’ve always needed someone who can show you the dark side.”

“Mor!” Henrik exclaimed, obviously embarrassed by her saying such a thing. The outburst only made her laugh more.

She grabbed him again and held him close, squeezing him tightly until he couldn’t breathe. But, she suddenly stopped, and he felt her hand graze his forehead. “Henke? What happened here?”

“Uh—nothin’,” Henrik murmured. He patted his hair back down, looking at Tino for a brief moment. His smile was bright, and he had such a happy grin that he was sure it could’ve sparkled. “I was...doin’ somethin’ stupid.”

His mother nodded, probably thinking that it was yet another scar from Mathias that she would pretend not to know about. It would be better to keep it that way—he'd rather not have to admit what he had done to earn that marking in the first place.

"You'll tell me about it as we eat then?" His mother asked, once again tightly wrapping her arms around him.

"Mm." He supposed some things were unavoidable.

"Tino...?" His father began to ask his boyfriend.

"Väinämöinen," He replied.

"Well, Tino Väinämöinen, I don't know what you had to do to make our stubborn boy come back here, but we're very grateful." He laughed, sounding as cheerful as he'd been when Henrik was a kid. "Please, come here whenever you'd like. You're always welcome in our little home."

"Thank you," Tino replied. He was as lit up as a Christmas tree, his eyes scrunched so tight from his beaming that Henrik was surprised he could even see through them.

"Okay, now enough of that." Henrik's mother laughed, "Come to the kitchen, we all have so much to discuss."

Henrik sighed himself into a contented smile, knowing that now, everything was alright.

Chapter 23

Chapter Notes



Henrik didn't even have to knock on the door, because as soon as he and Tino stepped up to the porch of Lukas' house, it swung open. Tino was holding a large collection of presents in his hands, while Henrik was holding onto Hana, plus some overnight bags. In a move that was so incredibly...*him*, Tino had given the two of them matching santa hats to wear to celebrate the coming of Christmas Eve. It was already dark out, and the path up to the house was illuminated solely by Lukas' fairy houses in his lawn.

"Hey guys!" Mathias smiled happily. "It's great to see you! Oh! And I love your hats!"

"Um, thanks." Tino laughed awkwardly, probably a bit unnerved that he'd answered the door so quickly. He looked like he wanted to grasp at the charm around his neck, but was obviously unable to do so because of how full his hands were. "We brought gifts!"

"Great!" he snickered, ushering them inside. "It's hardly a *Christmas* party without any presents!"

When Henrik stepped into the house, it was different than before. Now, it was lightly decorated with Christmas trinkets, like snowglobes and tinsel. Their home wasn't as intensely dressed as his own—though, with Tino as a roommate, he really doubted that anyone *could* top it. There was a thing that stuck out though, the sprig of mistletoe that hung just on the entryway to the kitchen. He glanced down to Tino, who had walked over to the living room to put all of their presents underneath the Christmas tree. He didn't look like he noticed it.

"Welcome," said Lukas, sidestepping out from the kitchen. "The cookies will be ready any minute now."

"Oh!" Mathias exclaimed excitedly, rushing over to his side. "How soon?!"

"Soon enough," Lukas responded. He was quiet for a moment as Mathias looked at him expectantly. With a flippant sigh, and a roll of his eyes he shifted his weight. "This is the third time today."

"Yup!"

"Ugh." He rolled his eyes again, though it was obvious from the affection that radiated off him that it was only an act. "Fine."

Mathias smiled brightly, leaning forward and dipping his boyfriend back just a smidge to get the kiss that he so clearly wanted. And Henrik smiled a little before averting his eyes and leaving the two of them, because now he had nothing to be jealous of.

He felt Hana wiggle and squirm in his arms, so he put her down, letting her wander off to wherever she may please before going to the living room and sitting on the floor with Tino. He was greeted with a small peck to the cheek, which Henrik immediately returned.

"Ugh," grunted Emil from the staircase, "why do I have to spend the holidays with you all, again?"

"Cause we're your family, silly goose!" Mathias laughed.

"God, you're insufferable," Emil said, blushing in embarrassment and crossing his arms. He went off straight to the living room, slouching against the couch and texting on his phone. Henrik noted that he was positioned in a way that would make it impossible for anyone to see what was on his screen—which probably meant that he was talking to that boy from Hong Kong that he liked so much.

On the TV in the front of the room they were sitting in was a "Santa tracker" which clearly stated that he was apparently *several* hours away, so they wouldn't need to worry about that for a long while.

“Lukas!” Emil called from the couch, leaning over slightly. He said something in Norwegian, which Henrik was *somewhat* able to understand because of the similarity to his own native tongue. It wasn’t anything interesting, only asking if he’d gotten anything in the mail. Lukas replied shortly from the kitchen, saying that there wasn’t anything for him, which made Emil groan in frustration. Henrik thought it best not to ask about it though, he probably wouldn’t like that he was listening.

“Something on your mind?” Tino asked him, snapping him out of his thoughts. He brushed his fingers through golden hair before pushing his glasses up on his nose.

“No,” Henrik said, leaning in on him more and wrapping his arm around his shoulder.

“You know,” Tino hummed, “I think that hat looks really good on you.”

Henrik huffed a laugh. “You think so?”

“Yup!” He shifted, moving to sit in his lap as he wrapped Henrik’s arms around himself. “You’d be a great Mr. Claus—baking cookies, taking care of Hana.—have you ever considered taking up knitting?”

“Don’t think so,” Henrik said, leaning his chin on Tino’s shoulder. He paused for a moment. “...‘Mr. Claus’?”

“You know!” Tino snickered, “Because I’m Santa! So who else would you be?”

“Mm, right.” Henrik blushed. He felt a special kind of warming in his heart, because Tino was implying that they were like a married couple. And Henrik knew more than anything how much he’d like that, even if it was something that was long in the future. He had to wonder what that would be like...When Tino would wear a ring on his finger that Henrik had placed there...And he would have one for himself too, forever showing their unadulterated dedication to each other.

“Ugh,” Emil groaned from the couch. He stood up and left the room, going over to the kitchen.

Tino shifted in his position so they could face each other, and Henrik pressed a kiss to his lips. A kiss that could communicate all of those feelings from before; All the love that they had for each other and all the love that they’d have in the future. He pressed his tongue to Tino’s teeth, who gladly allowed him entrance. He seemed to be completely lost in the moment. Feeling his tongue pressing against his own, a rush of excitement ran through him. It was a bit silly, but was still thrilling to him. He felt like they were teenagers in high school, exchanging secret kisses and knowing that they could be caught at any moment.

Of course they were.

“Oh my god, cut that out,” Lukas snapped.

He must’ve come over to tell them that the cookies were ready...unfortunately he’d probably seen more than what he wanted. Tino didn’t pull away immediately, seeming to enjoy the attention he was getting just a little too much. When he finally did, he was very out of breath.

“Sorry,” he wheezed. Henrik joined him in his apology.

“Whatever,” Lukas said. “Just come to the kitchen.” He turned on his heels and walked away.

Tino smiled brightly, pulling both himself and Henrik up. “Come on! Come on! Let’s decorate them together!” Seeing him make that face...with such a pretty smile... Henrik couldn’t help but feel a

warmness in his heart as he kissed Tino's cheek before letting him drag them to the other room.

When they arrived in the kitchen, Lukas, Mathias, and Emil were already sitting at the table, with plates laid out for them and beers to drink (Obviously, Emil didn't have one). The cookies were warm and steaming on the baking sheet, and Mathias had laid out plenty of different colored icing bags for them to decorate them with. The cookies came in all sorts of different shapes, like stockings and wreaths.

"Beer?!" Tino exclaimed excitedly, ripping open the cap and drinking from it.

Mathias cheered loudly in response. "Atta-boy! That's the spirit!" he yelled as he drank from his own bottle.

Henrik watched him chug it down, and was incredibly impressed at how quickly he was able to finish it off. Tino slammed the empty bottle down on the table, which made Mathias yell extremely loudly, and made Lukas shake his head. Emil on the other hand, looked completely enamored.

"Gonna drink yours, Ricky?" Mathias asked.

He shook his head, passing it over to Tino, who happily took it from him. He didn't really enjoy drinking too much anyway, and he'd especially hate to be as irresponsible as last time.

"Aw," Mathias said with a slightly disappointed tone.

"Lukas...Can I?" Emil asked quietly, watching as Tino began to chug his second bottle.

Lukas scoffed loudly and rolled his eyes. "You're 5 years too young for that."

"C'mon," Mathias urged lightly, "We're all here aren't we?! Let him try some! Give him a chance!"

"Yeah!" Tino agreed, slamming down the now finished bottle. "Let him try a beer."

Emil looked to be a bit *hopeful*? He probably just wanted to fit in with the rest of them; it couldn't be easy still being a young teenager among a bunch of twenty-somethings. And though Henrik highly disapproved, he understood *why* he would want to. He was too young to be doing that kind of thing.

"You really want to drink that bad?" Lukas asked Emil, twirling the cap of the beer bottle in front of him.

"Uh—yes! I do!" his brother exclaimed.

Lukas slid the beer over. "Take three big gulps and then you can have as much as you like."

Mathias and Tino cheered, grabbing Emil by his shoulders and shaking him in encouragement.

"Lukas," Henrik warned.

He batted his hand in dismissal, a visible glint in his eyes.

Mathias and Tino slammed their fists on the table, standing and cheering for him to drink. Emil straightened in his posture, swallowing nervously as he locked eyes with everyone in the room. When his eyes met Henrik's he shook his head, signaling him not to do it. Emil looked away from him and wrapped his hand around the bottle, throwing it up in the air as he gulped it down.

“Woo!” Chanted Tino and Mathias.

Emil slammed the bottle back down, having only taken a single mouthful. He looked sick, and he gagged, throwing his hand over his mouth and running over to the sink. Tino and Mathias only cheered louder, laughing as he did so. Lukas joined them, snickering because he probably knew that would happen.

Henrik rushed to Emil’s side, patting him on the back at the sink.

“You guys suck!” Emil exclaimed, looking over his shoulder at the three people at the table.

That only made them laugh harder.

“You okay?” Henrik asked him.

“Yeah, *whatever*,” Emil said bitterly. He wiped his mouth and went back over to the table, slumping in his seat. He pushed the beer bottle back over to Lukas, who gladly started drinking from it. Henrik followed him, before once again taking his seat next to Tino.

“You gave it your best shot,” Tino laughed, reaching across the table and rubbing his shoulder.

Emil straightened and turned away, hiding his face from view. He was probably just embarrassed about the whole thing.

“Okay, enough,” Lukas said, putting his hands out, “Only I get to laugh at my little brother. Stop making fun of him or I’ll kick you all out.”

Things calmed down after that, with all of them decorating Christmas cookies together. Himself and Tino had made an excellent team. Henrik had skillful hands and was able to drench the treats in layers of complicated frosting, and Tino obviously had *years* of practice. Their cookies put everyone else to shame. Especially Mathias, because a lot of the time he had trouble even getting the icing out of the bag without squirting it everywhere—mostly because he was already drunk.

“Look,” Henrik said, breaking off two bits of gingerbread and placing them on the top of the head of a person-shaped-cookie. They looked like little horns, and Henrik had decorated the rest of it to look like a certain someone’s motorcycle attire. Tino had his arm wrapped around his waist, hugging him from the side.

“Aw—is that me?” Tino smiled leaning in on him. “That’s adorable!”

“Gross,” Lukas said.

“Wait, wait! Give me a second! I have an idea!” Tino leaned across the table, grabbing for another person-shaped-cookie. He decorated it for only a minute or two before sliding it over to Henrik. It had a pair of dark blue jeans, and the eyes had heavy black spikes beneath them. It didn’t have a shirt on, and the torso had a couple of scars, just like Henrik’s own.

“From the concert!” he exclaimed happily.

“You two went to a concert?” Mathias asked, looking over the two of them softly.

“Yeah! It was so much fun!” Tino shifted in his seat before bringing his phone out of his pocket. After flipping through pictures for a moment, he pulled up one from that night, proudly showing it off. “It was pretty great.”

Emil, Mathias, and Lukas leaned in to look at it.

“Nice eyeliner!” Mathias laughed.

Normally, he would’ve taken a comment like that as sarcastic, but when it was coming out of Mathias’ mouth of course it was genuine. That man couldn’t be sarcastic for his own life.

“Thanks,” Henrik said.

Lukas looked to be pretty unimpressed (which wasn’t unlike him) and he was quick to resume with what he had been doing—decorating a stocking cookie with little pentagrams. Emil, on the other hand, looked to be completely fascinated.

“...Could you guys take me to a concert like that sometime?”

Him? Coming with them? The idea made Henrik smile a little. He’d probably have a lot of fun, jumping up and down to the music and headbanging with Tino; maybe he’d like to get his eyeliner done by him too. Tino probably wouldn’t mind, but it certainly would take a while.

Lukas immediately shut him down. “Nope. Absolutely not.”

“Why not?” Emil pouted.

“Do you *really* want to be alone with them?” Lukas asked pointedly. “They’re all over each other *already*.”

Henrik felt his face heat a little, slightly embarrassed, but not enough to react otherwise. Tino on the other hand, was the exact opposite, with a bright red face. He covered it with his hand, but it really didn’t help.

“...Oh,” Emil said.

“Alright, alright!” Mathias exclaimed, batting his hand in dismissal of his boyfriend’s disapproval. “Let them live a little! We were just like them back in high school!”

Lukas stiffened in his seat, and Henrik and Emil began to laugh.

“We were not,” Lukas said, flushing a bit as he crossed his arms.

“Oh yes we were,” Mathias snickered. “We’re lucky Ricky even stuck around.” They had mellowed out now, but back in high school...to say that they were a bit crazy for each other would be the understatement of the century.

“Can you all stop being gross?!” Emil shouted.

Tino, Mathias, and Lukas all got progressively more and more drunk as the night went on, which certainly wasn’t helped by the several rounds of beer pong they played together. Henrik had a little to drink too, just not nearly as much. But the highlight of the night came when Tino and Mathias got into a very drunkenly heated wrestling match on the ground.

“It—went in!” Tino slammed his hands down on the kitchen table, which now had a couple of red solo cups on it.

“No it—didn’t!” Mathias argued.

“Yes it—did!”

“No—no way!”

“Yeah!”

“No!”

“Prove it!”

“Prove it—*how*?”

“With—your fists!”

What happened next could only be described as an all out brawl, with both of them stripping off their shirts and tackling each other to the ground. Lukas wasn't as drunk as they were, only stepping out of the way as the two of them butted heads. Henrik also wouldn't get himself involved with that, he'd done enough wrestling with Mathias back in his youth. Hell, he had scars to prove it. Both of them did.

Tino punched Mathias directly in the stomach, but was countered with a hard slam into the floor. Because of how drunk they both were, their fighting was hardly coordinated. However, they were still pretty evenly matched, trading blows with seemingly limitless energy. Henrik remembered when he'd been in that same position, except they hadn't been drunk then. It was a bit uncomfortable for him to look over Mathias' chest like that—to see his scar-ridden body. Mathias had many more than Henrik did, but unlike himself, they were all inflicted by the same person. The damage Henrik did to Mathias was something that proved his monstrosity. Sure, Mathias was the one that started things back then, but that didn't mean he deserved to be beaten so brutally. They were just stupid kids back then who didn't know how to talk about anything. Henrik really wished that the two of them hadn't fought so much in the past; it would've saved them both a lot of pain.

Emil inhaled sharply, watching the two of them attempt to hit each other as they battled. He quickly shook his head and stepped out of the kitchen, with a red face and waving hands that were surely gestures only he understood.

Henrik decided to follow.

When he made it to the couch and sat down next to Emil, Hana leapt up in his lap, wagging her tail and licking his hands.

“Everythin' okay?” Henrik asked him.

Emil leaned on his shoulder. He was quiet for a moment, not saying anything as he fiddled with the sleeves of his sweater.

“...I have to tell you something,” he said quietly.

Henrik was silent, looking down on him and waiting for him to elaborate further.

Emil opened his mouth to speak, but seemed to be unable to find the words. “It's just that I—I feel —...” he clamped his mouth shut.

“...You don't have to tell me,” Henrik said.

“No, I need to—I just...” He cleared his throat, and glanced out of the room, looking to the kitchen.

Hana barked in Henrik’s lap.

“...I love someone I shouldn’t,” he said quietly.

Henrik cocked his head. What was he talking about? Had something happened with that guy he’d been messaging? Maybe love was a strong word—but he also *was* a teenager. Teenagers love strong words.

“Somethin’ happen?” he asked. “With...” he tried to recall the name, “Leon?”

“Leon?!” Emil repeated, flabbergasted, “No! Not at all!”

It was quiet for a moment.

“Well...actually...”

He sat back in his seat and crossed his arms. “Yeah, something did happen. When I asked him if he had gotten my Christmas gift in the mail yet he left me on read! And he hasn’t been online for hours!” He sighed in exasperation, “I can’t believe I made a lopapeysa just for him! And now he’s *ghosting* me.”

Henrik rubbed Emil’s back comfortingly, and guided his hand to pat Hana’s fur. He wasn’t really sure how else he could provide comfort—this wasn’t exactly his area of expertise. All he could do was let Emil vent his frustrations out.

“And he asked for my address a while ago, saying that he needed it to deliver *my* gift. But I’ve been asking Lukas every *day* and I haven’t gotten a thing!”

“...Maybe he wants to surprise you,” Henrik said gently.

“Yeah, or make me waste my time.” He rolled his eyes before sighing. “Sorry, that was mean. I just...don’t really want to talk about this with Lukas, Mathias, or Pops.”

“It’s okay,” Henrik said. He really didn’t blame him for being upset. Being a teenager was difficult enough, it must be hard trying to manage it all...especially only his older brother and his boyfriend to take care of him. But it *did* make him feel special that he was being trusted with such sensitive information.

A loud crash was heard from the kitchen, and Emil and Henrik jerked forward, looking over to see what had caused it. Luckily, it was only Mathias and Tino, having knocked over a cookie tray. They were now standing, hugging each other and apologizing for ever trying to beat each other up. Lukas was sarcastically snickering at the whole thing.

Henrik settled back down almost immediately, but Emil stared for a lot longer, his face growing pink before he shook his head and leaned back against the couch again.

“Damn it!” he swore, “This! This is what I was trying to tell you about!”

Henrik raised an eyebrow.

“I!” he exclaimed loudly, breathing in a deep breath. “I know I shouldn’t—and I know it’s wrong—and I know that you haven’t been happy like this for a long time—and I know I have Leon, and I love

him a lot but..." He fiddled intensely with his sleeves before moving closer to Henrik to whisper in his ear. "...I have a crush on Tino."

Henrik's heart practically stopped. "What?" He hated that it made sense. He hated how he'd not even noticed. That was the reason for all of Emil's blushing admiration towards him. He had always been a bit easily flustered, but never so much as he was when he was around Tino.

"I know!" Emil said, "I'm sorry! I know it's not fair to you, and that he's too old for me, and that I like someone else too—I just." he cut himself off, choking on his words. "I'm really sorry, Henrik. It wouldn't feel right if I didn't tell you."

He pulled him closer, rubbing his arm in comfort. "It's okay," he said. "Can't help things like that."

Emil was quiet for a moment. "...You're not mad?"

"No."

"...Oh."

Hana wiggled in Henrik's lap before cautiously going over to Emil comforting him.

"I'll get over it, soon, I promise." Emil sputtered. "This kind of thing happens all the time and I don't want you to think I don't respect you—or your relationship—'cause you know I do—and I—"

Henrik hushed him. "It's okay," he said again. "Don't worry about it."

Eventually, the party quieted down, with Lukas, Emil, and Henrik being the only ones who were awake. Henrik and Tino had changed into their pajamas, with Henrik's being modeled after an elf, while Tino's was modeled after Santa Claus himself. While they were getting dressed, his boyfriend had drunkenly muttered something about 'not wanting him to be his wife' and that 'he was a man' though he couldn't really be sure what that meant. It wasn't long after that when he and Mathias had passed out completely—too intoxicated to keep going. Mathias had passed out on the floor, while Tino leaned on Henrik's shoulder—lightly snoring without a care in the world. Lukas was a bit intoxicated too, but definitely not as much as their other friends had been. It had started to rain outside, and bolts of lightning had begun to appear through the glass of the house's windows.

"It's late," Lukas said, looking up at the TV, which still displayed the Santa tracker. "You should go to bed."

"I'm not going to bed because Santa's coming, *Lukas*," Emil sneered.

Lukas tiskted at him and got up from his seat on the couch, ushering his brother to also stand. "You don't want coal for Christmas, do you?"

"Santa's not real!" Emil insisted, annoyed that he was still being treated like a child.

The deep sound of a clock chimed from somewhere throughout the house, which made Lukas jump a bit in his posture.

"Go to bed. Now." He demanded.

"*Ugh*," Emil groaned. "*Whatever*." He trudged up the stairs. "You suck."

A loud crack of thunder sounded, and the rain poured down on the house, filling Henrik's ears with the sound of running water.

When Lukas came back, he put his hand on his hip and stood over him. "Are you sure you want to sleep here?"

"Mm." Henrik grunted.

A bolt of lightning was visible through the panes in the glass, and Tino snored against his shoulder. The clock continued to chime amongst the noise, going off five times before anyone said anything more. There used to be tension between them, but now it was gone. The scene had been set too many years ago for either to acknowledge what had proceeded. They had forgiven each other for their mistake, and it had passed. They were happier to never need to acknowledge it again.

Lukas glanced outside, navy eyes searching for something in the blackness of the night. He seemed to disappear in it for a moment, as he left the room, only to come back shortly with his black cloak, and the cross clip in his hair readjusted to be upside-down.

Five more clock chimes.

There was a knock at the door, and the thunder roared all around them, seeming to be right above them. Lukas rushed over and opened it.

Standing there, was the tall form of a man dressed in black and red. He too was wearing a cloak, but it was a deep burgundy in color. It draped down to about his ankles, which were covered by black leather boots. His hair was a strawberry blond, but it was mostly concealed by the top of a black umbrella, which was covered in lace that cascaded down around him. Henrik adjusted his glasses and looked closer, taking in those magenta eyes like dried blood and the sharp canines that protruded out of his smile. Immediately, he recognized him as Valentin Popescu.

"Lukas," he greeted, the word curling around his teeth in his thick accent.

"Valentin."

A bolt of lightning came down, striking nearby the house.

Lukas pulled out a gift from his cloak and gave it to Valentin, who immediately produced his own parcel.

"Enjoy the holiday," he said, his lips curling upward into a twisted smile.

"You too." Lukas replied.

The thunder came, cracking so loudly that the house began to shake. The rain was pouring down from outside, and the clock chimed a final time. The door was slammed shut.

"Sorry about that," Lukas said, readjusting the cross in his hair to its proper position.

Henrik shrugged.

Lukas said nothing more than that, disappearing upstairs briefly to dispose of his cloak and the mysterious box he had received only to come back to collect Mathias. With more strength than he thought he had, Lukas pulled him up, and dragged him away to their room.

Tino shifted against him, wrapping his arm around Henrik's in his sleep, which made him smile. He kissed the top of his head and pulled him close, all too glad that he wasn't at all involved in Lukas' strange sorcery.

Or...maybe he'd had a bit too much to drink after all.

There was a loud crash of thunder, and Tino sat bolt upright, clutching at the charm around his neck before letting out a few quick breaths. He blinked his eyes a few times, attempting to get adjusted to his surroundings. His head hurt a little, but not much; he'd certainly experienced worse. He massaged it a little before moving to stand, being careful to avoid moving Henrik and Hana from their position next to him on the couch—he was already such a light sleeper he really didn't want to disturb him.

When he was at his feet, he trudged over to the fridge to get something to drink. Upon seeing the milk carton, he grabbed for it and started drinking, being too tired to get himself a cup. He gulped it down until it was empty, sighing a bit at his pounding head.

There was a blinking of light from outside, and Tino turned to stare, watching the lightning land on the horizon.

"That's not very polite, you know." A cool voice came from his left.

Tino jumped in surprise, letting the empty carton clatter to the ground.

Lukas was standing there, with a hand on his hip and hair over his eyes. He looked criminally unimpressed—but also surprisingly like Emil without the clip in his hair (though he supposed that it wasn't shocking that they looked alike. They were brothers after all.)

"Oh, sorry," he apologized sheepishly.

Lukas shrugged and picked up the carton, throwing it away before going over to the pantry to fetch something.

It was the perfect opportunity to talk to him. They were alone, and Tino wouldn't have to worry about the shame that would come from the others overhearing. He wanted to talk with him, to tell him about all the things that plagued his mind. He'd gone through many of the same things he had. Tino wanted to ask him how he did it—how he was able to quit smoking and get over the loss of his own father...at least in the physical sense. He had to wonder how long it had been since he'd last been home...?

"What?" Lukas asked, turning over his shoulder. "Do you need something?"

Tino straightened in his posture. "Oh—no. Everything's fine."

Lukas didn't seem convinced in the slightest. He put something from the pantry in his pocket before sighing, closing the door and stepping away.

"You can ask me anything, you know."

"Oh—uh," he stuttered.

Lukas shook his head and gestured for him to come closer.

"I know what you're so worried about."

Tino took a step back and swallowed, his hand jittering as it instinctively went to the charm around his neck. He felt unnerved by him, and though he was only an inch or two taller—he seemed to tower over him, leering over with a twinkle in his eye.

“You—you do?” Tino stuttered.

“Of course I do,” he answered, pulling him by his hand. “It’s obvious enough from the look on your face.”

Tino laughed an awkward little croak as Lukas shifted around him, whispering lightly in his ear as he pushed him back over to the living room.

“Stay true to your convictions. Remember your loved ones. You’ll be less stressed. Find the willingness within yourself. You might relapse—but most people do. There’s no shame in that.” He continued to talk as he guided Tino back to the couch—back into Henrik’s sleeping arms. “It took me time—and it will take you time too.”

Henrik’s body felt warm against his, and Hana shifted in her sleep, rolling onto his chest.

“Oh, and one more thing.”

He pushed lightly on Tino’s forehead, whispering words he didn’t recognize and didn’t understand as his eyes suddenly grew heavy.

“...Losing a loved one doesn’t get easier—but you know that. Just keep your chin up.” He said a couple more things, but they were a bit fuzzy to his ears.

“Huh?” Tino mumbled sleepily, “What was that?”

Lukas laughed a little.

“Goodnight.”

His eyes shut tight, and Tino fell fast asleep.

When he woke up again, it was to the feeling of Henrik’s hands running through his hair. It’d seemed that he’d been doing it unconsciously, as Tino’s head was resting in his boyfriend’s lap.

“Hm?” Tino groaned in his half-asleep state, rubbing his eyes and staring up at him.

“Hjärtanskär, you’re awake.”

He felt a light compression on his chest—soon followed by an onslaught of licks on his cheek.

“No, Hana,” Henrik laughed quietly, pulling her away. “He’s not up yet.”

“What time is it?” Tino groaned.

“7,” Henrik whispered, “Others are still asleep.”

Tino sat up, rubbing the dog slobber off his cheek before leaning over and giving Henrik a sweet little kiss. His boyfriend happily returned it, caressing his cheek before eventually pulling apart. When Tino could see his face again, his lips were upturned in a happy little smile.

“Merry Christmas, Tino.”

“Yes,” Tino giggled, “Merry Christmas to you too.”

They got up from the couch shortly after that, making a quick trip to the bathroom to brush their teeth before going over to the kitchen. Unsurprisingly, it didn’t snow, it *was* California after all. Still though, the sun seemed to shine extra brightly because of the storm last night, so Tino supposed it was the next best thing.

“Cocoa?” Henrik asked, going over to the coffee machine.

“Yes please!”

There was a small little whimper from the living room, and looking over, Tino saw that Hana had curled up on the couch. She looked remarkably cozy, with her little tail tucked around her body...It made his heart warm. The coffee machine began to pour, spilling out steaming hot water into an empty mug below it—all the while Henrik had moved to stand by the doorway of the kitchen.

“Uh—come here,” he muttered. “Need to tell you somethin’.”

Tino attempted to hide his smile with his hand, watching his boyfriend stand there. He had no idea how stilted he looked—like he wanted to fiddle with his hands but was trying not to. It was incredibly endearing, watching him like that...He was obviously up to something, and Tino was eager to find out what it was.

“Oh, sure thing, kulta.”

His boyfriend stiffened a little at the use of that word, a light blush falling over his face as Tino stepped closer. When he was finally in arm’s reach, he made a little grab for him, putting one hand under his chin and directing him to look up.

And Tino laughed, because above them was a single branch of mistletoe.

“Ha,” he said in his usual dry voice, “got you.”

“You sure did,” Tino snickered in response. He shifted in Henrik’s arms, and he felt them fall down his back. His boyfriend’s eyebrows knitted slightly, and the corner of his mouth twitched.

“Um—” Henrik began to say, “Can I dip you?”

“Of course you can!” Tino replied happily.

It wasn’t long before his feet were swept out from underneath him (in more ways than one) as Henrik kissed him, dipping him down low as their lips met each other’s. He smelled just like oak and sandalwood, just like he always did, and he tasted like fresh mint. Tino probably could’ve stayed there forever, running his hands through his hair and wrapping his arms around him. Unfortunately though, his breath ran short, and they were forced to pull apart from each other.

“You’re such a...” he paused, trying to think of the word. “...a casanova!”

Henrik blinked. “Don’t think that’s right,” he said, clearing his throat.

“How about a prince then?” Tino replied, moving his hands to his hips. “A prince charming?”

His boyfriend reacted quite positively to that, hands trailing up to his shoulders as they stepped away from the doorway.

“A prince?” he repeated.

“A prince *charming*,” Tino corrected.

Henrik took one of Tino’s hands, leading them into a little waltz. Their steps fell into rhythm, and they held each other softly, dancing to no song in particular as they moved in sync.

“You’re right about it,” Henrik mumbled into his ear.

Tino’s heart skipped.

“What?”

“It’s complicated.” Henrik began to explain, sea-green eyes flicking over him as they danced.

“Mother’s side, couple cousins removed...but...”

“Really?! You’re royalty?!” Tino exclaimed so loudly that Henrik jolted before quietly shushing him. He smiled, a lot brighter than he usually did, as a mischievous little look overtook his face.

“No.”

And Tino laughed, nearly collapsing into a cackle as Henrik spun him, all too proud of himself for pulling such a mundane little prank. He laughed until his chest hurt—and until Henrik stopped their waltz to make sure he was actually okay.

“Shh!” Henrik attempted to hush him, still with a small smile. “The others are asleep.” But seeing his boyfriend so happy he just couldn’t stop himself. And why would he want to?

The moment lapsed, Henrik leaning down and resting his chin on Tino’s shoulder. The momentary joy slipped away as it seemed that his boyfriend had something on his mind. They swayed to non-existent music, shifting their feet back and forth to an inaudible rhythm. “Tino,” Henrik eventually started, his voice low and quiet.

“Yes,” he answered.

“You saw Mathias, didn’t you?”

“Of course I did.”

“And?”

Tino took a step back, leaving their embrace. “And what about him?” He asked.

“His scars.” Henrik answered quietly. “You saw them.”

“Oh,” Tino answered, “Well, yeah.” He may have been drunk off his ass last night, but he still remembered what he saw. The scars on Mathias’ body were impossible to ignore. The long white stripes stuck out against his skin, leaving trails of blazing white all around his torso. Henrik had escaped their fights relatively unscathed all things considered.

“Please don’t think less of me,” Henrik mumbled. “I know how it looks.”

“I don’t,” Tino answered, bringing his hand up to brush against Henrik’s cheek. “Like you’ve told me hundreds of times, those fights were years ago. And as long as Mathias forgives you I don’t see how

it's any of my business." His expression softened. "I'm just glad you're here and not back home. We all did stupid shit in the past didn't we?"

"You didn't give people scars," Henrik said.

"And you didn't run away from that," Tino responded. "You faced him and the two of you fixed your shit. But you don't need me to tell you that. I ran away from everything and look where it got me. At least you had the decency to face him." He smiled, his voice soft. "So no, I don't think any less of you." Henrik squeezed him a bit tighter and kissed the top of his head.

"Thanks," he said.

Tino only laughed in his usual, jovial way. "Now, let's not bring the mood down with all this serious talk. It's only the best day of the year!"

"Yeah," Henrik mumbled, finally smiling again.

When everything subsided, the two of them eventually decided to *actually* make their cocoa, rather than just let the hot water cool. After mixing a pack of powder into each of them, they went back to the couch, cuddling with each other and Hana until everyone else decided to come down.

Lukas was the first to join them, though he seemed more interested in playing with Hana than exchanging words. The silence was thick when he was around, though, the affection that radiated off him made it clear that this was just how he showed he cared. He wouldn't waste time with words, much preferring to just be in their presence. When Emil stumbled down, he had a sour look on his face—perhaps a bit troubled? Despite his best efforts, Tino wasn't able to cheer him up—which was ridiculous. It was Christmas after all! He would be happy soon enough though—especially considering the special surprise he had included *along* with Emil's actual gift. Mathias was the last to join them, stumbling down the stairs with his head in his hands. His hangover must've been *killing* him. But, as he was *Mathias*, he quickly subsided himself to joy as he rushed over to the Christmas tree.

"Look Em-y! Look! Santa got you a present!"

"Oh my *god*," Emil groaned, "I'm not *twelve* anymore, Santa isn't real!"

But Mathias wasn't listening to him, shoving a red and green present in his face. "Come on Em-y! You gotta open it!"

"Yeah, open it." Lukas said, a teasing little smirk settling on his face.

Emil rolled his eyes and ripped open the paper, scowling as he pulled out a set of noise-canceling headphones. "Wow," he said sarcastically, "thanks, *Lukas*."

"Hey!" Mathias huffed, "I bought you—" he sputtered, "I mean, Santa worked very hard to make those for you! You should thank him!"

Emil rolled his eyes. "Oh great Santa, I thank you for this gift, which surely has nothing to do with the fact that Mathias just moved in. I am so grateful."

Tino couldn't help himself, and he choked out a laugh, as Lukas crossed his arms, and Mathias lightly shoved Emil's shoulder. Henrik also seemed to enjoy the joke, though he didn't audibly laugh like Tino did.

And when they were all together like this...it felt like...home. And though this wasn't his first Christmas without his family, he didn't miss them like he had the first time. He had a new family now—a family of friends who loved him, a family that he chose.

When Emil, Mathias, and Lukas opened their gifts from Tino, they were surprised to find that along with their presents (a puffin onesie, a grilling apron, and a book of sudoku puzzles respectively), they'd been gifted \$100 cash.

"Tino, we can't take this," Lukas said, attempting to pass him the money.

"No, no," Tino refused him, leaning into Henrik's chest. "I needed to pay you back anyway—for the phone."

"Aw, come on buddy, that was so long ago...water under the bridge! Just buds helpin' buds!"

Tino's eyes softened. "Yeah, I know. But you all helped me out when I needed it, so let me help you...please?"

Emil, unlike the other two, only thanked him. He didn't seem to have any desire to return it, utterly entranced as he stared at the bill in his hands before stuffing it in his pocket.

"Yeah but..." Mathias said, looking down in his lap. "This is a lot of money...isn't it?"

Tino only smiled. "Consider it a bridge under the water!" Henrik's chest rose a bit in a light little snort.

"Water under the bridge," he corrected him.

Tino turned to stare at him. "...That's what I said, wasn't it?"

He shrugged.

When Mathias opened his present from Lukas, the room was filled with an incredibly loud gasp.

"Luke-y, you shouldn't have!" he exclaimed, pulling three tubs of hair gel out of a red and white gift. Lukas smirked at him, with eyes narrowed in affection. "And it's my favorite brand too! How'd you know?!"

"It's not like it's the same one you've used since we were 18," Lukas said dryly, "and I shouldn't even need to say that you've stocked up my bathroom with it for *years* at this point." Henrik snorted a small laugh, and Emil rolled his eyes.

"Thanks babe! This totally rocks!" His eyes scrunched up in his joy, and he was quick to shove a red, blue, and white present into Lukas' lap. "Here! Here!" he exclaimed loudly, "Open mine now!"

He shifted slightly, examining the paper before gently unwrapping it. Underneath the colorful exterior was a simple black box with a removable top, which Lukas eyed cautiously, navy pools shifting upwards to look at Mathias, who gave an encouraging smile.

"Go on," he cheered, "open it!"

He pulled off the lid hesitantly, before gasping and covering his hand with his mouth. Slamming the top back onto the present, he urgently began to whisper in that combination of Danish-Norwegian that they so often spoke in. Mathias responded in that cheerful manner he always did, with a light and

happy voice as he gestured down to the box. Looking up to Henrik, he was shaking his head, expressing that he knew exactly what Mathias had gotten him, and thought it was ridiculous. Lukas did something with his hands, perhaps some sort of sign? He wasn't sure, as he quickly stopped before bringing the gift close to him again.

"What did he get him?" Tino whispered in his boyfriend's ear.

"Not important," he said, as though he was desperate to keep him from knowing.

If Emil knew what it was, he also gave no indication, though it seemed that he too knew what was hidden inside. Perhaps it would just have to remain a mystery to Tino.

It must've been around 11 am when all the presents were finally unwrapped. It all went by in such a blur, though there were quite a few highlights, from the matching "best buds" shirts Mathias had gotten for himself and Henrik, and the massive troll statue that Lukas had gotten for Emil. Tino himself had received a dog toy modeled after some kind of ancient-snake-thing from Lukas (He'd said it was named Bøyg) as well as a bag of chocolates. From Mathias, he'd gotten a photo album, which he had promised him to fill up with cute pictures (He'd seemed oddly insistent on that front, though he couldn't be sure as to why). And finally, from Emil, he'd gotten a onesie that looked like a reindeer, complete with stuffed horns on the hood. They were probably some of the best Christmas gifts he'd ever received, save for a few exceptions from last year.

But, he didn't have his gift from his boyfriend yet, and he was sure it would be as amazing as he was. Henrik had insisted that Tino open his gift last, and vice versa, so he was forced to anxiously wait and see what his beloved had gotten for him. But now, that time had come, with his other spoils strewn about, Tino watched as Henrik pulled open the wrapping paper of a blue present with a yellow ribbon. And that man he loved so much cracked a large smile when he pulled the gift out of the box.

"An enderman?" he asked, his voice soaked with joy as he pulled the plush into his lap. "How'd you know?"

"Just a feeling," Tino answered, pulling his boyfriend's gift to him out from under the tree.

"...Always was my favorite mob," he said quietly.

Emil, Mathias, and Lukas, were silent, as they watched Tino pull open the wrapping paper of the white and blue present. They seemed more than a bit eager to know what Henrik could've possibly gotten him. Tino's heart was pounding in his chest, and as much as he wanted to clutch at the charm around his neck to relieve his anxiety, he didn't, yanking the paper until it revealed...

"Oh my god, Henrik," Tino breathed.

It was a beautiful book, a deep royal blue with gold embellishments. The pages were pure white, like they'd never been touched by another hand, and Tino hugged it to his frame.

"The Great Gatsby!" he exclaimed. "Thank you so much!"

Henrik rubbed the back of his neck, smiling sheepishly at him. "Got you the anniversary edition," he said. "...Thought you'd like it more than the regular one."

"Well, I love it!" Tino exclaimed.

"A book?" Mathias asked, "And *our* Ricky?! Who would've thought?! Did you even go to the book store all by yourself?!"

“Shut up,” Henrik growled to his friend. Though his voice was thick with what others might perceive as aggression, Tino knew he was only being playful with his friend, who was already snickering and laughing to himself.

“*Okay*,” Lukas said, clearing his throat and standing, “Now, who wants to help me pick up all this wrapping paper?”

But, instead of everyone rising to stand so they could pick up the mess they had made, everyone remained seated, as the doorbell rang.

“That’s weird,” Mathias said, scratching his head. “The mail shouldn’t be here *this* early...”

“It’s *Christmas* you idiot,” Emil said, rolling his eyes. “Mail doesn’t come on holidays.”

The doorbell rang again.

“Who could it be then?” Tino asked, turning over his shoulder.

“Arthur and Valentin already gave their gifts to me...” Lukas mused, rubbing his chin in thought. “And they’re too busy with their own families to visit again...”

It rang for a third time.

“Fine—fine—I’m coming,” Lukas yelled, going over to the door. He yanked it open, and all the others in the room went over to see who it was.

Standing there was a boy who looked to be around Emil’s age, with choppy brown hair and thick eyebrows. His eyes were a golden brown, and he was wearing a bright red headset, and an...incredibly homemade looking sweater. He didn’t say anything for a while, twirling the skateboard under his arm before blowing a large bubble of bright pink bubblegum.

“Yo,” he said, flipping a salute.

“Leon?!” Emil exclaimed from inside.

Lukas narrowed his eyes, staring out the door with a tight-lipped frown. “Who are you exactly?” he snarled.

The boy straightened slightly, obviously not expecting such an aggressive greeting. “Leon, Emil’s friend.”

“Uh—right,” Emil stuttered, prying the door open slightly.

Lukas didn’t seem to be letting up at all, but he eased when Henrik put his hand on his shoulder. “He told me about him,” he whispered in his ear. “...Good kid.”

“Oh,” Lukas said, though he didn’t exactly seem to trust this newcomer, he still opened the door and allowed for Emil to exit.

“I’ll be back in a bit! Just gonna go around the neighborhood!” he said, taking Leon’s hand. He turned without a chance for Lukas to argue, rushing down to the road as he asked him questions.

“How are you here?”

“You gave me your address.”

“Why are you in town?”

“Cousins live here.”

“Is that a skateboard?”

“Yeah.”

“You’re wearing the sweater I made you!”

“Yup.”

“When did it arrive?”

“A while ago.”

“Did you get a gift for me?”

“Yeah.”

“Where is it?”

“Teach’s place.”

Tino didn’t get the chance to hear any more as the door was slammed shut by Lukas.

“Alright,” he sighed. “*Now*, who wants to help me with the wrapping paper?”

“Oh! Me!” Mathias exclaimed. He rushed off to the kitchen, quick as a whip and grabbed some trash bags, as he enthusiastically began to clean up the mess from before. Lukas, Tino, and Henrik soon joined him, and it wasn’t long before the house was spotless once again.

“Mathias,” Lukas called, holding up a few full bags, “help me take these out.”

“Sure thing babe!”

When they exited the house, all was quiet, save for little Hana’s panting breaths as Tino and Henrik ran their hands through her fur.

“Havin’ a merry Christmas?” Henrik asked, holding his arm around Tino’s shoulder.

“Best one I’ve had in years.” He replied with a smile.

Chapter 24

Chapter Notes



See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Henrik knew he really shouldn't be so...hesitant...to knock on the door. Raivis was his *friend*, and he wanted his help. Still though, he couldn't be sure why the room was so off putting. Sure, he'd never actually gone to Raivis' room before, but he hadn't expected it to be so...menacing. He turned to look over his shoulder, glancing down the dark hallway of the upstairs before returning to look at Raivis' door. It was just like any other door, wooden with a brass handle there was nothing unusual about it! So why did he feel so unnerved?

He'd been to the other's rooms before, as he and Eduard sometimes liked to talk about Minecraft together, and other times he'd go to Toly's room to talk to him about cooking techniques (most of the time, when he did this Feliks was there, and he was actually quite good for conversation when he wasn't being so shy). But this was Raivis, arguably the roommate that he was closest to—and yet he'd never gone to his room.

Henrik straightened his posture, and put his knuckle to the door. Hitting it twice, he took a little step back, moving out of the way for when it opened. But there was nothing, the only sound hitting his ears being those of Felik's snores from the guest room. He sighed, it was late at night anyway, so he supposed that he was probably asleep.

"Need something?"

Henrik jolted, standing up straighter as he looked over his shoulder, before immediately relaxing. It was only Raivis, with those familiar cerulean eyes and messy blond hair. He was dangling a bottle of balsam in his hand, swinging it idly at his side as he stared up at Henrik.

"Oh—um" Henrik stuttered, unconsciously beginning to fiddle with his hands. "...Wanted your help with somethin'." He shifted his weight to his other foot.

Raivis blinked at him for a moment, moving out his free hand and gesturing for Henrik to move away from the door. He did so, stepping away and allowing for Raivis to slip away inside. It was left open just a crack, which he took as a sign of being invited in.

Inside Raivis' room was like stepping into another world. The walls were painted a dark burgundy, and were decorated with many different kinds of animal skulls and skeletons. Candles were strewn all around, and Raivis was busying himself by lighting them, revealing more and more of this strange little place. His desk was covered in various papers, along with that notebook he seemed to like so much. Wherever Henrik stepped, the floor creaked in an ominous and ghoulish whisper, as well as being covered in crumpled pages—which were probably poems that he had rejected.

"A bit late to need something," Raivis said flatly.

"Had to wait for Tino to fall asleep," Henrik replied.

Raivis raised an eyebrow slightly, looking at him suspiciously as he crossed his arms. "Remind me—what was it that you wanted?"

Henrik awkwardly began to fiddle with his hands again, feeling a bit sheepish as he struggled to voice what he'd come here for. "Uh—" he began to say, "...Wanted to...um." He swallowed, cursing himself for his inability to speak straight. "...Was hopin' that I could...borrow somethin'."

"What kind of *something*?" Raivis challenged.

Henrik rubbed his arm in discomfort, feeling awkward about asking for something from a *friend* of his. He hadn't really had a lot of those before, and he didn't want to offend him. Most of the time, he was used to doing things by himself, so it was a bit strange to be asking for something from someone else.

"Oh," Raivis said, relaxing slightly. "I understand."

Henrik immediately felt his posture relax as Raivis pulled him over to his desk.

"A surprise you shall receive," he hummed.

"Oh wow," Tino gasped, moving closer to Henrik on their living room's couch. "Did you really build that just for me?" He was leaning on his shoulder, while Hana was laying next to them. She seemed to be in such a deep sleep that nothing could wake her.

"Mm," Henrik hummed, "you like it? Took a long time."

"Of course I do!" Tino exclaimed happily. He had his arms draped around Henrik's torso, looking down at his lap at his computer. He'd said that he was working on a "surprise" for him awhile back, but he had no idea that it would be this...*extravagant*. Well, for a surprise that was built completely in minecraft that is. It was a block by block reconstruction of Helsinki's senate square, complete with fully furnished versions of the cathedral, the national library, the University of Helsinki, and the government palace! It was a place he'd often visited when he was young—as he liked to disappear amongst the books and become lost in all the stories they told. He kissed Henrik's forehead. "That was so sweet of you—really." His boyfriend smiled, probably happy to know that he'd been so pleased. He moved closer to him, kissing him briefly before resettling again.

"Oh my *god*," Emil complained. "It's New Year's Eve and you two are *still* all over each other." The boy was wearing a really cool black and red jacket—obviously being the gift Leon had gotten him for Christmas last week.

"Leave them alone!" Mathias interjected. "They aren't hurting anyone!"

Tino and Henrik laughed a little, turning back around on the couch and looking over the room. In the corner were Feliks and Tolys, laughing to themselves as they watched Raivis, Eduard, and Mathias drink. Lukas, meanwhile, was leaning against the wall, watching their antics with a smirk on his face.

Henrik shifted his position, closing his laptop and putting it aside on the couch. He took Tino's hand, caressing it softly.

"Can you come to the kitchen with me?" he asked shyly, tilting his head away slightly.

"Sure thing!" Tino replied happily.

Henrik stood up, dragging him behind him as he tore through the room. He went at a remarkable pace—almost like he'd been planning for something. When the two of them were alone together, he felt Henrik's hand interlock with his own, pulling him close as he held him by the waist. Tino, in turn, took him by the shoulder.

"Hjärtanskär," he breathed.

"Kulta," Tino returned.

Henrik pulled him closer, and the two of them swayed together, dancing as a familiar little song began to play out of his boyfriend's phone.

My my, at Waterloo Napoleon did surrender!

"Henrik," Tino laughed teasingly, not breaking from their formation, "what's all this?"

"...Wanted to surprise you," he replied, blushing. "Make you happy."

The song continued to play in the background, the chorus echoing out as Henrik gave him a little spin.

"Oh, kulta," Tino cooed sappily, "I already am."

Henrik's blush grew heavier. "...Want to be happier?"

"Hm?"

His boyfriend broke away from their dance, going over to one of the cupboards and pulling out...Raivis' notebook? Tino immediately straightened—not only in shock—but in alarm. He wouldn't just *lend* his notebook out. That was his most prized possession! He never let that thing out of his sight—ever!

"Don't worry," Henrik said, noticing his expression. "Got permission to borrow it."

"Oh," Tino said, puzzled.

Henrik held it out to him. "There are some things in here...Things you should read."

"...And you're sure Raivis is okay with it?"

"Mm."

Tino stuck his hand out, still feeling slightly uneasy as his fingers brushed over the cover. To think that he'd actually be allowed to *open* this book. To see what Raivis had been so occupied with writing for so long. He was about to open the cover, when the two of them were interrupted by the loud ringing of the doorbell.

"...We should get that first," Henrik said.

Tino flushed slightly, giving his boyfriend a soft kiss as he put the notebook down on the counter. They left the room hand in hand, going to the front door. It slammed open, revealing four people.

"Happy new years, cousin!" Ivan said, smiling as brightly as he'd ever seen him. His white scarf was still tight around his neck, and he wore a white ushanka that covered the majority of his platinum blond hair. Since their last meeting, the two of them had decided to get their DNA tested, which proved they were cousins. It wasn't much of a revelation, but it still felt nice to have confirmation of their suspicions. He was standing next to Yao, who he seemed to have grown pretty close to, as he was wearing what looked to be a home-knitted yellow scarf, along with a red and gold jacket. But, it wouldn't have been a party if it had not been for the two *extra* guests they had brought along with them. Yong Soo and Leon. The two of them weren't dressed anything like how Tino had last seen them. Of course, Yong Soo had been in his work uniform, and Leon had been wearing Emil's lopapeysa—but he hadn't expected them to be so incredibly stylish. They looked like they had come straight out of some kind of asian streetwear magazine.

Leon was wearing a baseball cap and a black facemask, along with a pair of chunky black sneakers and a dark shirt. His jacket was black too, but it was covered in bright red Cantonese lettering, though Tino obviously had no idea what it said. Yong Soo on the other hand, was also wearing black, but it was in a different style. Instead he was wearing chains, around his neck, cuffing his ear, as well as a large ringed one that sat on his hip. He had two shirts on, a white long sleeved one, and a black one on top that displayed a Korean graphic Tino didn't really understand.

If he didn't know their faces, he probably would've thought they were different people all together. He had no idea they were so fashionable.

"Thanks for having us," Yao said.

The four of them stepped inside, and it wasn't long after that they were assaulted with hugs.

"What took you so long?!" demanded Emil, pulling Leon into a hug. "There's only five minutes until the new year!"

"Teach is slow," he replied.

"I am not slow!" Yao snapped back, "We would have been on time if you had all eaten before we were about to leave!"

Ivan laughed at that, reassuringly patting Yao's shoulder as Yong Soo took off, going over to Raivis and throwing him into a hug.

"I missed you!" he exclaimed, holding him tightly.

And—for once—Raivis replied with just a hint of affection. "...Me too."

"Happy new year," Tino said, staring up at Ivan.

"Happy new year," Ivan said again, this time more softly. He patted his shoulder, seeming to notice how much happier he looked since they'd last met. "And thank you for the Christmas gifts, we all appreciated them." Yao, though he was standing right next to him, said nothing, but communicated his gratitude with a little nod.

"You're welcome!" Tino said with a joyful grin.

Lilac eyes met each other, and he smiled, pulling Tino into a cute little hug before he and Yao went over to the living room. And as soon as he'd entered, a loud bark was heard, which was followed by a laugh. Doubtlessly happy to be reunited, at least for a short while.

When they were alone again, Henrik squeezed Tino's hand. "Lots of people here," he said.

Tino smiled. "Lots of *friends* here."

Henrik blushed. "Right," he corrected himself, "*friends*."

Tino tightened his grip around Henrik's hand, reassuring him of his words as the two of them snuck off to the kitchen once again. The music from before was still playing in the background, as it seemed to be on a loop.

This time, they wouldn't be interrupted.

Henrik went to the counter and picked up the notebook, flipping to a particular page near the middle.

“Here,” he mumbled quietly, “read these.”

Tino took the book from him, leaning against Henrik’s body as he held the notebook in front of them. His boyfriend rested his cheek on the top of his head, looking over him as he studied the pages. Normally, this notebook was filled with scribbles (at least from what Tino had briefly seen of it of course), but this time the lines were clean, inked with sharp precision as they painted beautiful words across the paper. They were wonderful tales of love—everlasting and eternal. It was some of the most touching poetry Tino had ever read, making him clutch his heart and his eyes water as he tore through line after line. He was unable to stop.

He flipped the page.

“Kulta,” Tino gasped, looking over it.

Henrik laughed a little, squeezing him a bit in his arms. Tino traced the page with his fingers, going over the line indents of a drawing. It was the two of them, together, from that night at The Lucky Dragon. He recognized the art style almost immediately.

“Did Yong Soo draw this?” Tino exclaimed in shock.

Henrik nodded.

“According to Raivis, he’d said we were...” he paused, as if trying to remember the phrasing he’d used “‘too in love not to’.” Tino’s cheeks went a light pink, and he hugged the drawing and the notebook to chest. “Poems are about us too...apparently.”

His heart skipped, and he felt his heart fill with warmth. Henrik had probably gone through quite a lot to get this for him—and considering how shy he was. Tino felt so grateful, like he’d been gifted a man sent from the heavens to be his one and only.

“Oh, kul—Henrik.” Tino said, turning around and pulling him into a kiss. “This is amazing. I love it. You’re the best boyfriend ever.”

He smiled, rocking slightly as they once again began to dance.

“You are too.”

The music sang out from Henrik’s phone, and they kissed once more, too lost in each other’s presence to think about anything else.

At least—they would have been if not for Mathias’ loud voice.

“One minute to the new year!” he exclaimed.

“One minute!” Tino exclaimed, “Come on, let’s get out of here and spend it with everyone!”

Henrik smiled, and kissed his forehead. “Whatever you say, hjärtanskär.”

Tino dragged him by the hand, taking him out of the room to reconvene with their friends. Ivan and Yao were talking with Tolys and Feliks in the corner—who seemed to be acting a lot less shy than he usually was. His cousin was holding Hana in his arms, who looked like she’d missed him quite a lot. Emil was shyly talking to Leon. Raivis and Yong Soo had taken residence in a corner, not really

saying much to each other—but from the smiles that they both had, it was obvious how much they enjoyed each other’s presence. Though it didn’t escape Tino’s notice that Raivis seemed to shake slightly at Ivan’s presence. Hopefully that would be something he’d learn to get over. Finally, Eduard, Mathias, and Lukas were standing in the center of the room, with Mathias filming as they all got absolutely wasted.

Tino smiled, looking over them all. Who would’ve thought that he’d be ending this year without his family? And who would’ve thought that he’d end up feeling the happiest he’d ever been. He had so many people who cared about him—so many people who wanted to see him succeed. He didn’t need his family. Not when his real one was right here with him.

Henrik kissed him again, going over to Raivis to return the notebook before once again joining Tino at his side. Yong Soo reached up and took it from him, and they appeared to exchange a few words before he started to doodle in it, with Raivis watching over his shoulder. It seemed that Raivis had been right, and that he *was* important. Tino was glad about it, knowing that he now had *two* friends he trusted enough to show his most private works. When Henrik returned to him, his phone was still playing that silly little song, and Tino couldn’t help but swoon as he fell into his arms.

“Hm,” Henrik laughed, obviously noticing how lovestruck he was. But Tino didn’t say anything, only giggling and pulling his chin down, allowing him to kiss the scar on his forehead.

Waterloo, couldn’t escape if I wanted to.

“Get ready for the countdown!” Eduard shouted drunkenly, grabbing everyone’s attention.

“Already?!” Tolys exclaimed.

The room became increasingly louder, as people began to count off the numbers together.

“Ten!” yelled Mathias.

Waterloo!

“Nine,” said Lukas.

Henrik pulled Tino close, sea-green eyes showering him with more love and affection than Tino had ever known. He held him close, not daring to look away as the cheers became louder and louder.

“Eight!” Yong soo exclaimed enthusiastically.

Knowing my fate is to be with you.

“Seven,” said Raivis with a monotone voice, those his eyes kept going back to linger on Ivan, almost like he was afraid of him.

Wa-Wa-Wa-Wa-Waterloo!

“Kulta,” Tino said, cupping his boyfriend’s face with his hands.

“Six!” yelled Tolys.

Finally facing my Waterloo...

“Yes?” Henrik asked, putting his hands over Tino’s.

“Uh—five!” Feliks said shyly.

So how could I ever refuse?

“I love you,” Tino whispered.

“Four!” Ivan smiled.

I feel like I win when I lose!

Henrik laughed quietly, looking into Tino’s eyes.

“Three!” Yao yelled.

Waterloo!

“Love you too, Tino,” Henrik mumbled.

“Two!” said Emil.

Couldn’t escape if I wanted to!

“One!” cheered Leon.

Waterloo!

“Happy new year!”

Tino and Henrik launched into a kiss, with his boyfriend falling down low as he dipped him. He held his hands at his waist, while Tino held him tight. The confetti went off all around as the sound of their friends' happy cheers sounded off in the background. But Tino wasn’t paying attention, too awed by how in love with him Henrik looked when they finally broke apart. The way he smiled, with those happy crinkled eyes and red cheeks. He’d never get tired of that beautiful face his boyfriend had. He hoped he’d get to see it more often in the years they were to spend together.

Tino didn’t move as Henrik straightened his posture, pulling him into another long kiss, instead, he only held to him tightly. He wanted to be with him more than anything, and honestly, they both hadn’t been this happy in a *very* long time. If he could be sure of anything, it was that he loved this man, and that he wanted to be with him for as long as the Earth circled the sun. He’d love him until they met the end of the cosmos.

Knowing my fate is to be with you!

Chapter End Notes

And with that, my very first fanfic has been completed. Thank you to everyone who read this far. I think I've grown a lot as an author since finishing this work a few years ago. Thank you for all your support! I can't wait to post the rest of my work!

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!